

BirdLife Overberg Newsletter 15 – March 2025



Chairmans Chirp...

Well, we started the new year off with two excellent trips to Nuwejaars SMA. Both were full to capacity and some great birding was had by all. These are always well subscribed and allow us access to land and venues that we otherwise would not be allowed to visit. The good news is we have already booked another two trips for January 2026. When the dates of the trip are posted, book early so as not to miss out!

As you will know from previous posts, our total Overberg monthly count has been stuck on 399 different species for some time. I'm pleased to announce that bird number 400 was recorded last month at De Mond Nature Reserve by Lester van Groeningen - a Buff-breasted Sandpiper.

More encouraging news is filtering through this month in that the broken bridge at De Mond is due for repairs starting in March, and the repair to the broken boardwalk at Rooisand NR is out for tender quotes.

Hopefully, both will be fixed in the coming months.

To finish: please make a note on your calendar that the club's AGM this year will be on the 14 April. As always, it is very important that as many members as possible attend this event, so please make a big effort to come along and have a say in how your club is run.

Thank you

Steve.

Diary Dates

10 March : Monthly Talk – Birding in Zambia by Thinus & Anne-Marie Jonker: Mollergren Hall

29 March : Monthly Outing - De Mond NR

12 /13 April : Flying Higher Identification Course – Hermanus, hosted by Anton Odendal

14 April : BirdLife Overberg's AGM – Mollergren Hall

26 April : Monthly Outing – Greyton NR via Helderstroom

Further details of these events will be posted on the club's website and WhatsApp groups nearer the time.

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Trip report: Nuwejaars Wetlands 18 January 2025 - Jill Wheeler

It was an early start for the intrepid birders on Saturday – meeting at 05:45 at Eastcliff Spar – which meant that many of us were up by 04:30 – caffeine definitely required! As always, the trip to Nuwejaars at this time of the day, was absolutely stunning with the early morning cloud formations over the estuary reminding us how privileged we are to be able to live in this special place.

Once the dirt road past Grootbos was over, we were already spotting birds with a special sighting of a large flock of White Storks, several Blue Crane, Jackal Buzzards, a Denham's Bustard and a Rock Kestrel.

The Nuwejaars Wetlands Special Management Area is a unique conservation model now being replicated in other parts of South Africa. The 46 000 hectares of private land is protected and farmed by 25 landowners and the town of Elim. There is a commitment to conservation and sustainable farming by the signing of title deed restrictions – this means that the biodiversity is protected whilst food security is still supported through sustainable farming. Game, birds and flora flourish in this unique conservation venture on the border of the Agulhas National Park.

What a great opportunity to visit these secret wetlands, with our guide Eugene, a longstanding member of the Nuwejaars team. Full of anticipation, we climbed into the safari vehicle and three 4x4's followed us making up the group. The air was fresh, and the day was cool, perfect for a day of birding.

Small ears popping out of the fynbos was the first sign of a steenbok, one of many we were to spot during the day. Our first stop at one of the large dams gave us plenty of birds to add to the list: elegant White-breasted and Reed Cormorants, Cape Teal, Great Crested Grebes, Black-necked Grebes and Little Grebes, Common Greenshank, Pied Avocet and Black-winged Stilt.

Using Carin's "scope" we were treated to fantastic views of two Purple Herons on the far side of the dam and a solitary Lesser Flamingo. For the novices amongst us it was valuable to see three types of Grebes and have the differences clearly explained by Eugene.



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Excitement was momentary as the potential Fish Eagle turned into a South African Shelduck; but compensated by several Blue Crane taking to the skies just in front of the vehicle. Elegant demeanour, powerful wings and unique calls – a sighting which always takes your breath away.



There were plenty of Kittlitz's' Plovers to be seen at the water's edge along with Blacksmith Lapwings and further in, Yellow-billed Ducks and Common Moorhens.



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As we moved on towards the next dam, an unidentified large bird was seen swooping through the trees. This was later confirmed to be an African Marsh Harrier.

En route plenty of small birds were spotted including an Agulhas Long-billed Lark, a Zitting Cisticola, African Pipits and a Cape Longclaw.



Yellow-billed Egret



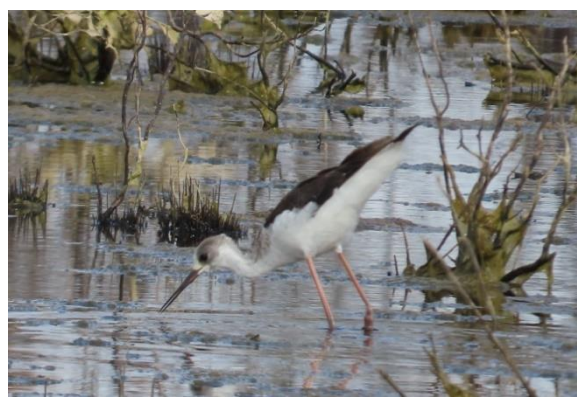
Leucistic Black-winged Kite



Glossy Ibis

Time for coffee and sandwiches amongst the serenity of nature and a chance to appreciate the landscape spreading out in front of us.

Our final stop by a dam revealed two Blue-billed Teals on the far side – incredible bird spotting – and thanks to the scope we were able to get a good look at their vivid blue bills! An intermediate Egret could be clearly seen through the reeds along with a Black-winged Stilt. An African Swampphen was spotted and a shy, rarely seen, Maccoa Duck.



And all too soon the morning was over. Many thanks to Johan for organising the trip, Eugene our guide and Steve for leading the trip (and opening all the gates!). A total of 92 birds were identified and the full list can be found on our website.

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The Leucistic Black-winged Kite mentioned in the above report caused great discussion and debate on the day. The birders that witnessed it were split between a Common Buzzard and a Kite, and it took later expert advice and comment to finally come down on the side of a Kite. Below is a brief description of the cause of this condition and the problems it brings the host.

Leucism in birds is caused by a lack of melanin, a pigment responsible for black, grey and some browns. A leucistic bird will have white feathers unless its normal plumage also contains carotenoids which are responsible for yellows, and which are unaffected by the condition. They can often have normal coloured eyes, bills, legs and feet.

Leucism is inherited but the extent of the condition can vary between adults and their offspring, and it can also skip generations if the leucistic genes are recessive.

Leucistic birds will have weakened feathers, which are more susceptible to wear and tear and, as a result, they may have difficulty flying. If they have very large patches of leucism, they are going to be more conspicuous and vulnerable to predators. In some cases, a leucistic bird may not be recognized by a potential mate.

Want to improve your bird identification skills? Then give this this fascinating approach and idea by Faansie Peacock a go.

"A fun mental training exercise I often encourage is to describe a bird without mentioning its colour. Talk about its size, where it was sitting, how it was moving—anything but colour. It's fascinating because, while our minds default to colour due to our excellent colour vision, we often overlook other critical details. This exercise helps train your mind to focus on those subtler, often missed aspects of bird identification."

This simple yet effective exercise is a fantastic tool to sharpen your bird identification skills in the field. Here's why it works:

1. The Importance of Observing Beyond Colour

For many birders—especially those just starting out—the first thing we notice about a bird is its colour. While colour can sometimes quickly point us toward a species, relying on it too much can become a limitation. Trickier species, like LBJs (little brown jobs), raptors, and juveniles, often require us to look beyond colour to identify them accurately. Developing the ability to observe behaviours, size, and movement enhances our overall birding skills.

2. Training the Mind to Focus on Details

Describing a bird without mentioning its colour forces us to focus on subtler cues like posture, location, and unique movements. These details provide a deeper understanding of the bird in question. Experienced birders often talk about behaviours, shapes, and subtle markings—things that

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might go unnoticed if we're fixated on colour. This level of observation takes time and practice but becomes second nature when we make an effort to look beyond the obvious.

3. Building a Broader Identification Skillset

Birds aren't always seen in perfect lighting or at close range. By focusing on non-colour traits, we can identify species more effectively in challenging conditions, such as poor lighting, when birds are silhouetted, or when they're far away. This skill can make all the difference in identifying that elusive or rare species.

4. Making Birding Fun and Engaging

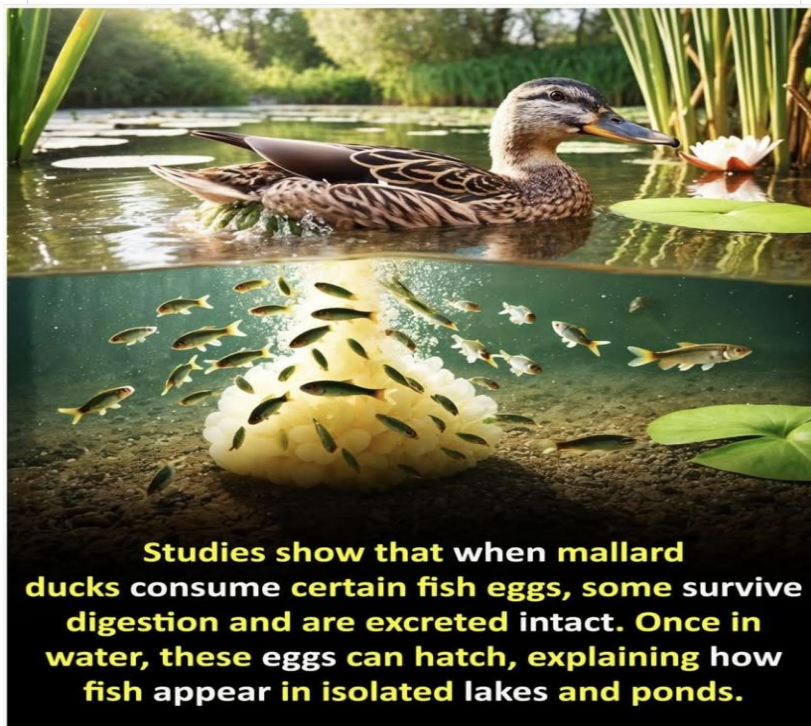
This exercise adds a playful, interactive element to birding, whether you're out in the field or on a road trip with friends. It challenges us to think differently and deepens our appreciation for the diversity of bird behaviours and characteristics.

This little game is perfect for long car rides on the way to your next birding adventure, making the trip fun and productive. Plus, it's a great way to refine your skills while enjoying the journey.

Why not give it a try on your next outing? You might be surprised at how much more you notice about the birds around you!

Ever wondered how little fish start to appear in isolated ponds and dams with no connection to other water sources? Well, blame it on the ducks!

Birds like ducks and geese can unintentionally transport fish eggs stuck to their feathers when flying between different water bodies, allowing them to populate new lakes. 🦆



Studies show that when mallard ducks consume certain fish eggs, some survive digestion and are excreted intact. Once in water, these eggs can hatch, explaining how fish appear in isolated lakes and ponds.

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It's the time to be on the lookout for the European Roller in our region – Words and image by Carin Malan

European Roller / Europese Troupant (31cm)

This species occurs as two subspecies in Southern Africa. ***Garrulus*** constitutes 60% and ***semenowi*** 40% of the Southern African population.

The two European Rollers currently in Van der Stel Pass near Botriver is of the Subspecies ***semenowi*** (they have a green & brown wash).

They breed in Iraq, Kazakhstan and north-west China and overwinter in two distinct regions in Africa, from Senegal to Ethiopia, Congo and South Africa.



A new walking trail has been launched on the Agulhas Plain – the first of its kind through the Nuwejaars Wetlands.

Interpretive trail signage is included along the easy 4.2km route, bringing these wetlands to life and showcasing why these waterscapes are special.

The trail, called the African Marsh Harrier Trail, is on the Nuwejaars Wetlands Special Management Area (NWSMA), which is owned by private landowners. It is managed by the non-profit company, the Nuwejaars River Nature Reserve (NRNR).

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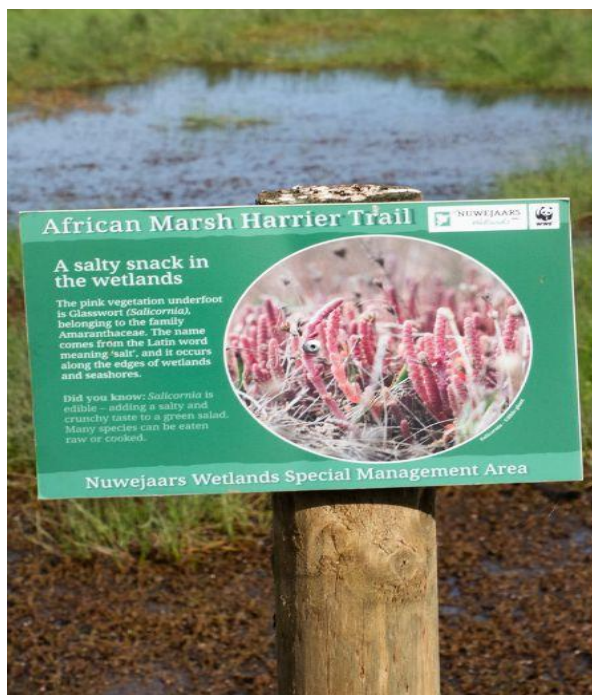


The creation of the trail was funded by WWF South Africa, with the support of the Overberg District Municipality.

The relaxed and unchallenging trail is ideal for walkers of any fitness level, including children. It takes around two to three hours to complete, and it's meant to be enjoyed slowly while taking in the incredible wildlife that lives in the wetlands, especially the bird life.

Slow down and breathe.

According to Ross Kettles, Operations Manager of the NRNR, "You just never know what you could see during a walk in these wetlands. Every time we walk this trail, we see something new. When we created this trail, the aim was to allow walkers to slow down, take a breath and enjoy all the things nature has to offer – even the miniature things."



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“Even the miniature things” includes the tiny, but Critically Endangered Micro Frogs. These frogs, no bigger than a person’s thumbnail, can be heard en masse in the winter to spring months along the route. With some patience, they can even be seen at certain times of the day. They were only discovered on the NWSMA in recent years, although these wetlands are now believed to be a stronghold for them.

The trail starts at the luxurious wine estate, Zoetendal Vineyards along the R43 outside the town of Elim. It heads over the Nuwejaars River to a birding platform and then to a bird hide. The hide, called the Elizabeth Harding WWF South Africa Bird Hide, offers birders the opportunity to look for wetland specialists. Species such as Red-billed Teal, Cape Shoveler, African Swamphen, a number of Warblers and Plovers and many others occur here.

Ross says, “A special sighting is that of the African Marsh Harrier, which is regularly seen hunting over these wetlands, not to mention other birds of prey, such as African Fish Eagle.”

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Why do falcons have stripes under their eyes? The answer is more complex than we thought.

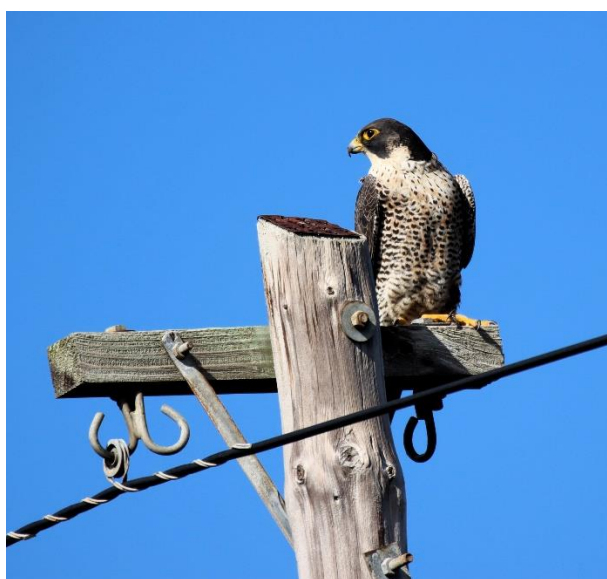
Article by Arjun Amar and Chevonne Reynolds. All images by Jeanetta Hoekstra

Falcons are found worldwide, from the fast and slick hobbies to the large and powerful gyrfalcon of the Arctic tundra. In Africa, falcons are found across many habitats. Several species are unique to the continent, including the endangered Taita falcon, which nests on high cliffs, and the greater kestrel, which breeds in the old nests of other species, particularly crows.

There are 39 species of falcon in the world. They occur on all continents except Antarctica. Falcons belong to a group of unrelated birds called raptors (or birds of prey), which are distinguished mainly by their hooked beaks, keen eyesight and sharp talons.

As scientists studying falcons, we have always been fascinated by the dramatic dark stripes beneath their eyes (malar stripes).

These eye markings don't just define their look—they've long been thought to act like natural sunglasses, reducing the amount of sun glare reflected into their eyes and thus improving their ability to hunt in bright sunlight.



This idea may also sound familiar to sports fans. Athletes in baseball and American football often smear dark stripes, known as "eye black", under their eyes to enhance their vision in bright conditions. Scientific studies show that this can improve contrast sensitivity and reduce glare, providing a critical advantage for athletes tracking fast-moving balls. Could it be that nature perfected this innovation long before humans caught on?

In 2021, we published a paper providing evidence that this "natural eye black" might help peregrine falcons, the most widespread raptor species, to spot and hunt prey in sunny environments. But in our new paper, we reveal a more complex story—one where these markings may play other roles across different falcon species.

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Studying peregrine falcons

Using over 2,000 photos of peregrine falcons submitted by birdwatchers around the globe, our earlier study tested the "solar glare hypothesis" by investigating whether peregrines living in brighter environments had larger or darker malar stripes. For each photo we assessed the size (length and width) and darkness of each falcon's malar stripe. We also described the direction in which the bird was posing in case this had an effect on the malar stripe's appearance. We then linked the location of each photo to a global dataset of solar radiation exposure.

This allowed us to estimate the level of solar radiation to which the birds in the photos were exposed, and to compare that with their malar stripes.

We found that peregrines living in sunnier regions, like Australia, had larger and darker malar stripes than those in areas with less sunlight, like Scotland. The findings supported the idea that these markings evolved as an adaptation to bright, sunny environments and work to shield the falcons' eyes from glare, giving them a better chance of spotting and catching prey mid-flight.

This was the first empirical support for a hypothesis that had long been part of popular ornithological (bird) lore, and often taught to undergraduates, but had never been rigorously tested. Peregrines, the fastest species in the world, hunt agile birds like pigeons and doves, and therefore rely heavily on precise vision. Thus, the idea that their malar stripes could work to enhance this ability made evolutionary sense.



What about other falcons?

Inspired by these findings, we set out to explore whether the same pattern applied to other falcon species. We used over 10,000 images of 39 falcon species collected from citizen science platforms, including the Macaulay Library. Surprisingly, this larger study challenged our earlier assumptions.

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We again linked the solar radiation levels experienced by the falcons in different locations to the size and darkness of their malar stripes. Contrary to what we observed in peregrines, for these other species the size of their malar stripe was unrelated to the level of sunlight exposure. In our new analysis, peregrines still showed a clear connection between brighter environments and darker stripes, but this was not the case for their relatives. We also didn't find an overall pattern of species living in sunnier regions like Africa having larger and darker malar stripes. In fact, some African species, like the Dickinson's kestrel, had no malar stripes at all.

Our findings supported the opinions of previous research, which also pointed out inconsistencies with the solar glare hypothesis. It was noted that many desert falcons, like the Saker falcon, have relatively small or inconspicuous malar stripes.

So, why the stripes?

These results suggest that malar stripes may serve different purposes depending on the species. For peregrines, the solar glare hypothesis still seems to hold up. But for other falcons, these markings might play roles unrelated to sunlight. Perhaps they help to camouflage the falcon's eyes from prey or act as social signals to other falcons.

This variability underscores the complexity of evolution. Just as athletes in different sports wear specialized gear, falcons' malar stripes may have developed in accordance with the unique challenges of their environments and lifestyles. The stripes are not a one-size-fits-all solution but reflect the diversity of adaptation.

Citizen science

Peregrines remain the poster child for the solar glare hypothesis. But our findings remind us of the need to not assume that relationships in one species hold true for others. Future research could test these ideas experimentally or delve into the social and ecological functions of malar stripes in other falcon species.

We hope that citizen scientists and their photos can still play a key role in these efforts. Without their data, we could not have undertaken this research. Such photos are playing an increasingly useful role in understanding the ecology and evolution of raptors, with recent studies using photos to examine raptor diet at unprecedented scales.

If you're interested in supporting raptor research, consider uploading your raptor photos to citizen science platforms like eBird or iNaturalist. Your observations could help unlock new discoveries about these remarkable birds.



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Blue Crane chicks on the mend

Two juvenile blue crane chicks are currently in rehabilitation at the Kogelberg Biosphere Wildlife Rescue and Training Centre (KBWRTC).

This is the centre to which BirdLife Overberg generously donated R20K for the development of a large enclosure that would allow the larger rehabilitated birds space to roam and fly to regain strength before their eventual release back into the wild.

Their (the cranes) presence is a testament to the dedication and perseverance of centre manager Michelle Watson and her team.

From small beginnings the centre, the first in the Western Cape, now boasts a clinic, a high-care section, a kitchen, a classroom, and outdoor enclosures of varying sizes. Having been granted a permit in December last year, it can now house injured animals for treatment and rehabilitation, keeping them until they are fit for release.

Michelle and her team have worked tirelessly over the past year on what has been a community-driven project with no official funding other than the very generous community donations of materials and labour. The granting of the permit was like receiving an early Christmas present, as she can now approach potential fundraisers to help with major expenses.



One of the rescued Blue Crane chicks that was found in the Napier region.

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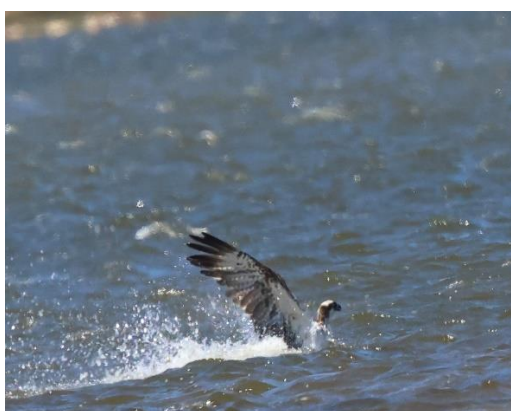
Check your Osprey images for rings please - Carin Malan

I was fortunate to have spotted a ringed Osprey at the Rooisand Nature Reserve in Kleinmond on April 30, 2017.

This same bird was sighted by Mike Buckham a year earlier on February 13, 2016, in the West Coast National Park. It was the first Russian Osprey recorded in South Africa, originally ringed near Onezhskoe Lake in Vologda. This bird has been travelling an incredible 10,500 km one-way every time it migrates to South Africa.

After reviewing photos that I took last Saturday (Jan 2025), I discovered that I had actually captured another ringed Osprey—this time with a steel ring instead of the coloured bands. While I'm unable to read the details on the ring, I'm thrilled to have spotted another ringed Western Osprey at the Rooisand Nature Reserve. I will report this sighting to SAFRING, even though the ring details are not visible.

If you've photographed a Western Osprey this season, I encourage you to revisit your photos and let me know if you spot any rings.



Images by Carin Malan

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Kamfers Dam Bird Die-Offs

Birds dying at alarming rates at Kamfers Dam highlight concern of sewage contamination.

Recent bird deaths and paralysis at Kamfers Dam near Kimberley, Northern Cape, have raised serious concerns among conservationists. University of Pretoria pathology lab findings suggest botulism as the cause, likely worsened by bacterial imbalance from sewage from the Homevale Wastewater Treatment Works. The discovery of *Clostridium septicum* in affected birds' intestines indicates exposure to untreated sewage.

The Department of Water Affairs and Sanitation has issued a directive under Section 48 of the National Water Act in the past, ordering urgent rectification of the treatment plant situation and more recently has laid criminal charges against the Sol Plaatje Municipality, which case is currently under investigation. A February 2024 interdict application resulted in an April 16, 2024 court order requiring the municipality to present a plan within 60 days to restrict untreated sewage from the treatment plant flowing into Kamfers Dam. The municipality has not complied, and the applicant awaits an enforcement order hearing.

Historically, Kamfers Dam hosted southern Africa's largest permanent Lesser Flamingo population, with over 80,000 recorded in 2006. As one of only four African breeding sites for Lesser Flamingos, supported by an artificial breeding island built in 2006, the site earned recognition as a Natural Heritage Site and Key Biodiversity Area. For the past 4-5 years, flamingos have been unable to breed due to artificially high water levels submerging the breeding island. Water quality has deteriorated as the Sol Plaatje Municipality failed to maintain the Homevale Wastewater Treatment Works. The once-abundant flamingo population is sadly now only visible on local business signage.

The current crisis was noticed in late November last year when Ester van der Westhuizen-Coetzer, Environmental Specialist at Ekapa Minerals based in Kimberley, reported numerous dead and dying birds to BirdLife South Africa. Affected species include Lesser Flamingo, Fulvous Whistling Duck, South African Shelduck, Red-knobbed Coot, Blacksmith Lapwing, and Egyptian Goose. So far, well over 100 dead birds have been collected by the Department of Water Affairs and Sanitation alone, with an unknown number of further dead birds remaining inaccessible to collection efforts.

According to botulism experts, Drs Pearson and Jensen, controlling botulism requires stabilising the wetland ecosystem to prevent decaying animal protein accumulation, particularly during favourable temperatures for toxin production. Water level manipulation and frequent carcass removal are essential measures. The municipality has not implemented either action.

Dr Alan Lee, BirdLife South Africa's Science and Innovation Programme Manager, states that "A failure to act will create a vicious feedback loop under the current circumstances, resulting in increased levels of environmental toxins."

Mark D. Anderson, CEO of BirdLife South Africa, states: "It is shocking to see the extent to which the water quality has been permitted to deteriorate in Kamfers Dam... birds are dying unnecessarily and in such numbers. BirdLife South Africa urges the Sol Plaatje Municipality to intervene without delay and take the required steps to improve conditions at Kamfers Dam for the sake of the birds, and the people of Kimberley."

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Ester van der Westhuizen-Coetzer emphasises: "It is unacceptable to witness hundreds of birds die in their natural habitat due to negligence from pumping untreated sewage into a natural area. Kamfers Dam was once a pristine bird area ...where different species could flourish. If our generation fails to save this unique habitat, it will be lost to future generations. Losing South Africa's only Lesser Flamingo breeding site to such a catastrophe must be stopped. We urge all stakeholders to engage and do something to save those that cannot speak for themselves."

About BirdLife South Africa

BirdLife South Africa is a registered non-profit organization dedicated to bird conservation in South Africa through scientifically based programs supporting sustainable natural resource use. The organization, along with partners including Ekapa, works to protect Kamfers Dam as a productive bird habitat and critical Lesser Flamingo breeding and foraging site.



This is an ongoing problem across South Africa, the non-maintenance of sewage plants, illegal breaching of estuaries and contaminated factory spillages all continue, and that is why it's important that not only the bigger organisation fight to conserve these environments and the birds habitats and feeding / breeding grounds, but clubs like ours voice our concerns and do what we can to highlight the problems.



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BIRDLIFE OVERBERG OUTING TO ROOIELS, HAROLD PORTER & STONY POINT.

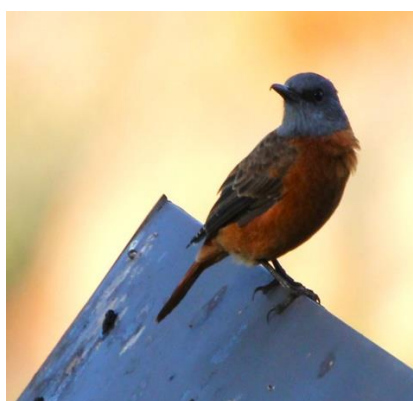
DATE: 22 FEBRUARY 2025. By Johan van der Westhuizen.

The 9 birders left the Onrus OK parking area just before 7 am, in perfect weather conditions, destination Rooiels, where 3 more birders joined the group. Most of the more common birds were ticked off along the way. A small flock of African Olive Pigeons were spotted perched in a tree next to the road as we drove past the Botanical Gardens in Betty's Bay.

Birds were everywhere as we started walking slowly down the road from the boom gate. Cape Sugarbirds, Cape Buntings, Double-collared Sunbirds, and Cape Canaries were soon added to the growing bird list. A Male Cape Rock Thrush was seen perched on the roof of one of the houses next to the road. Expectations were high after meeting another birder on the road who showed us a close-up photograph of a Peregrine Falcon taken further down the road. He also informed us that he had heard a Rockjumper calling at the same spot. A Cape Grassbird was seen flying into a bush no more than 5 metres from the group but despite spending some time waiting for it to emerge only one photographer managed to get a shot, and that only of the head. We were constantly entertained by Familiar Chats, Orange-breasted Sunbirds, Red-winged Starlings and Malachite Sunbirds flirting amongst the Fynbos, as we strolled down the road to where the Rockjumper was heard. We spent three hours in total at the Rooiels site but disappointingly the Rockjumpers were not seen or heard by anyone in our group. Coffee and breakfast were on the menu as we arrived back at the vehicles.



Birding at Rooiels – Ruth Vary



Cape Rock Thrush & Neddicky – Johan vd Westhuizen

At Harold Porter Botanical Gardens the group strolled up the path to the waterfall logging birds at regular intervals, Sombre Greenbul, Sweet Waxbill, African Dusky Flycatcher and Amethyst Sunbird amongst others. A mixed flock of swallows and swifts graced the skies and produced Black Saw-wing, Greater-striped Swallow, Little Swift, White-rumped Swift, African Black Swift and Alpine Swift. The highlight of the day occurred when we encountered African Paradise Flycatchers, Blue-mantled Crested Flycatchers and Olive Woodpeckers, all in proximity of the waterfall.

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Familiar Chat – Iain Geldart



Orange-breasted Sunbird & African Penguin – Johan vd Westhuizen



A quick visit to Stony Point produced the ever-present African Penguins with Cape Cormorants, Bank Cormorants and Greater Crested Terns thrown into the mix.



Male & Female Olive Woodpecker – Tierck Hoekstra

The final bird count was a bit disappointing given the perfect birding conditions, with only 51 species logged. This, however, did not detract from the enjoyment of birding in these amazing and beautiful locations.

RED-BILLED OXPECKER AS THE BIRD OF THE YEAR 2025 – Anton Odendal

Anton celebrated the Red-billed Oxpecker as the bird of the year at the monthly talk in February. Red-billed Oxpeckers occupy a unique ecological niche by feeding on ticks and other ectoparasites found on herbivores. These birds are adapted for this with short legs, sharp claws and stiff tail feathers, enabling them to cling to their hosts. Red-billed Oxpeckers use their beaks like scissors to work through the animals' fur in search of ticks or to pull them from the animals' skin. An adult oxpecker typically consumes 400 ticks a day and a single bird's stomach has been found to contain 1,666 tick larvae. They therefore play an extremely important role in the natural control of

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ectoparasites. Oxpeckers also feed on mucus, ear wax, dandruff, blood from open wounds and insects in flight. Host animals include many herbivores and cattle.

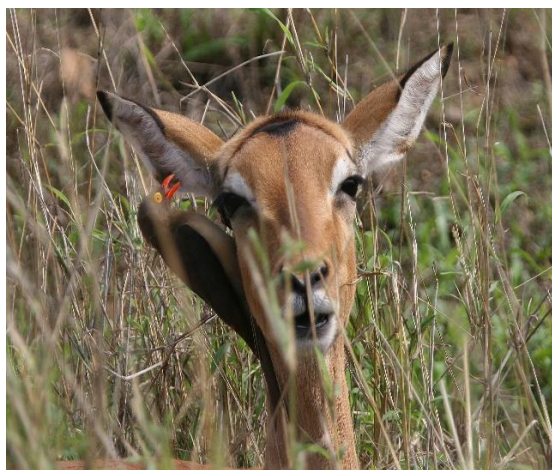


Images by – Carin Malan

Oxpeckers breed in holes in trees, mostly near water. These birds are secondary cavity breeders, so they are dependent on finding natural cavities or those created by other birds or animals. They are co-operative breeders with breeding pairs being assisted by up to seven helpers who support the breeding pair with choosing the breeding site, constructing the nest and feeding the chicks. They also remove eggshells and faecal sacs from the nest.

In the early 1900s the oxpecker population severely declined. These declines were caused by the outbreak of Rinderpest, increased trophy hunting and the increased use of ectoparasiticides many of which contained Arsenic which is lethal to both ticks and the birds. This caused the oxpecker population crash resulting in the birds being restricted to larger game reserves where ectoparasiticides were not used.

SANPARKS, the Endangered Wildlife Trust and others have launched reintroduction programs to bring the birds back to areas where they once occurred. These programs have been supported by educational campaigns encouraging farmers to use oxpecker-friendly dipping products. Emphasis has also been placed on the importance of oxpeckers in controlling ticks and other ectoparasites in animals.



Images by Anton Odendal & Brian Taylor

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Oxpeckers caught in the Kruger National Park and elsewhere have been re-introduced to many sites. Examples include Marakele, Addo Elephant & Mountain Zebra National Parks, Kangwane Nature Conservation, Lapalala Wilderness, Tembe Elephant Park, Shamwari Game Reserve in the Eastern Cape and many other private cattle and game farms and reserves. This conservation success story resulted in the IUCN down-listing the Red-billed Oxpecker from “Near Threatened” to “Least Concern”!

During 2025, BirdLife South Africa creates awareness about the Red-billed Oxpecker through the production of an informative poster, the development of learning resources for schools that are free to download from the BirdLife South Africa website (birdlife.org.za), articles in *African Birdlife* magazine, social media posts and presentations to interested groups.

In the next newsletter we will review details of this remarkable translocation process and the promise that such progressive and proactive campaigns hold for the future conservation of bird species.

Club members birthdays in March and April.

4 March : Dawid Malan / 5 March : Dee Willis / 7 March : Collen Naude / 12 March : Elsabe Ketteringham / 12 March : Cecilie Trumpelmann / 14 March : Carolyn Harris / 19 March : Ria Willis / 21 March : Christine Griffiths / 25 March : Richard Ketteringham / 28 March : Ilza Perold

4 April : Ben Thompson / 7 April : Thinus Jonker / 8 April : Riel Franzen / 9 April : Hilddidge Beer / 10 April : Deon von Wielligh / 13 April : Hoogie van Hoogstraten / 20 April : Nita Hazell / 21 April : Jessie Walton / 24 April : Mark Lane-Jones / 24 April : Alistair Moody / 25 April : Catherine Bruce / 29 April : Lynne Dabbs

As always, a big ‘thank you’ to everyone who has contributed to this newsletter by sending me images, articles, snippets or just ideas. Please keep them coming as they are much appreciated.

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