



Wakkerstroom Bird Club

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NEWSLETTER NUMBER 44, JULY 2016.

Hi Everybody,

This is the first newsletter we have issued for a while for which we apologize. Our intention is to produce them more frequently and in shorter format. The reasons are that frequent issues give news that is more current and also shorter copy is more likely to be enjoyed, so here goes! PLEASE let us have some feedback.

1. Our Club celebrated its 4th year of existence in June this year, living proof that time does indeed fly when you are having fun! A nice milestone, thanks to everybody for your continued support!
2. The 3rd Sandy Twomey Memorial Photograph Competition is on the drawing board and some excellent prizes are being assembled. The subjects will again be People, Fauna and Flora, Seasons, Scenery, Buildings and Architecture and MUST reflect life in Wakkerstroom. Final details will also be published soon via Posters in town and in future Newsletters. Photographs can be taken from now (fresh, current photographs, please), we would like subjects to be topical. Full details will be published soon via Posters in town and in future Newsletters, PLEASE, entries from professional photographers will not be accepted.
3. At our recent very successful Soup and Sherry evening Linda van den Heever gave a brief talk on her work with Black Storks. I asked her for a short note for those who were not there:
"Concerns have been raised about the status of the Black Stork in South Africa after a comparison between the South African Bird Atlas Project (SABAP1: 1987-1991) and SABAP2 (2007 to present) showed a significant decrease in the reporting rate for the species. In 2015 BirdLife South Africa launched a project to investigate the reasons for the decline (if any) of the South African population. From the early 1960's to the early 1990's Warwick Tarboton kept detailed, handwritten records on 62 Black Stork nest sites in the then Transvaal. To gain a better understanding of the current status of the species in South Africa, it has been decided to use Warwick Tarboton's extensive data as a starting point, and to repeat the surveys of the old Transvaal nest sites. The results of these surveys should indicate whether there is cause for concern, and will inform the future course of the project. One nest on this list was located near Volksrust, on a farm named Glen Athol, and this site will be the focus of ongoing monitoring. However, we would like to expand our knowledge of Black Stork in the Volksrust/Wakkerstroom area. If you know of any Black Stork breeding sites, please contact Linda at +27 (82) 331 3902, or linda.vdheever@birdlife.org.za.
4. There was an instance again last week (29 June) of a willow on the vlei being chopped for firewood. Considerable decimation has occurred recently and members need to be aware and report such actions to either a Bird Club or WNHA Committee member for immediate follow up. The vlei is such a large area to police adequately and the concern is that nesting/roosting/perching sites are being degraded. Fortunately incidences of rubbish being dumped in the vlei seem to have diminished. Constant vigilance and reporting of incidents to the correct people are our best weapons, please help!

5. It's a real pleasure to be able to end off this issue with several items of good news: Read on!
6. **Eleen Strydom "Wakkerstroom's Secretarybird"** We were very pleased to hear that on presentation of her thesis for her BTech Degree the committee reviewed her work and agreed that it was of such a high standard that if she were to write up the additional work that she had already done they would allow her to submit this as an MTech Thesis. I have only heard of this once before and I feel this attests to the hours and days of hard work she put into this work. We are really proud of Eleen and she has really put the Wakkerstroom Secretarybird population on to the map.

Mike Maxted and Jenni Maxted-Smith, and from all the members! Well done, Eleen!

7. **The Flufftail Hide is to be rebuilt, good news at last!**

The devastating fire which destroyed the Flufftail Hide, arguably the "best" hide of them all, was a serious blow to the birding facilities here in Wakkerstroom. The fire was caused by a Flashover on an Eskom line and, although they accepted responsibility for the fire, somehow the funds were lost in the bureaucracy and were not forthcoming to rebuild the hide. That is until now.... The Good News is that a team at BirdLifeSA are in the process of designing a new Hide- fireproof- that will incorporate all of the latest thinking on Hide design. It is probable that there will be a significant shortfall in the funds available and we have offered to organise a fund raising project to assist. We have also undertaken the supply and maintenance of the Interpretative Educational material that will be displayed in the hide similar to the material we have supplied for the other four hides in Wakkerstroom.

This really is Good News and we look forward to having our full complement of hides back in use.
Norman Dennett.

8. **Diary: Outing - Tuesday July 12** – an outing kindly offered by Roland Stone to his farm and two others to which he has access. In deference to the weather we will leave the Library at 08h00 for the short drive to the farm.

Wednesday 20 July- Meeting at BirdLife – a spectacular David Attenborough DVD on New Guinea's Birds of Paradise, the amazing colours and mating displays are a wonder to watch. 17h30 for 18h00 start.

The Winter CAR Count will take place on Saturday 30 July with a briefing at The Crowned Crane at 17h00 on Friday 29. Please do your best to be there, experienced counters and novices, to get an update on the counting procedure. We would like some new faces to travel with "old hands" in order to widen the pool of observers to call on for future counts.

The Citizen Scientist Day has been confirmed for Saturday 17 September and hopefully a couple of activities like bird ringing and the odd field trip will spill over to Sunday. Speaker's topics have yet to be finalized but will be wide-ranging and not to be missed. Entrance is free and everybody is invited to attend, we will be casting our net far and wide for this unique occasion.

9. **Southern Bald Ibis Project.** The strong possibility exists that the “Baldie” monitoring project will be revived in our area and that the massive amount of work already done and information gained will get a new life. Funding, as usual, will be an issue but it is being worked on.

We are hoping for an evening talk by either Dr Hanneline Smit-Robinson and/or Robin Colyn, both of BLSA, to give us an early update on the situation.

“OUR” OTTERS

Finally their ID is established! Grateful thanks to Mary Scholes who some time back transported a road-kill otter carcass to the museum and, on returning to view the prepared skeleton, was given the formal identification. It is Spotted-necked Otters (*Lutra maculicollis*, for purists), which inhabit the vleis and give so many residents and visitors unique viewing opportunities of the species.

Classified as a small otter with an average length 1m and weight around 4.5kg, females being slightly shorter and up to 1kg lighter than males. Old males are normally larger and heavier than younger males and on occasionally some really big ones have been spotted at the vleis.

These otters belong to the same genus as Eurasian and North American freshwater fish otters. In Wakkerstroom, their diet is certainly augmented by freshwater crabs and frogs and they have been seen to catch birds as well (more often than not, Yellow-billed Duck). Recently a few were spotted playing with/eating a long-legged bird. Unfortunately this took place behind low scrub and the ID of the bird could not be established, nor a decision made as to whether it was a freshly killed or scavenged carcass.

Certainly they breed in the area; females have been sighted suckling pups and many of us have experienced wonderful sightings of youngsters at play. On one memorable occasion, even hi-jacking the monthly vleis walk with their antics and excited vocalisation. Birding really did take second place that day!

It appears they have a patchy distribution in southern Africa but are more common north of the border. As with birds, they are sensitive to habitat change and consequently face similar threats. In their particular case a burgeoning human population altering riparian vegetation and reducing cover, coupled with mistaken beliefs that they are competitors for fish and prey on livestock. Additionally, they are also used in traditional medicine. Studies have shown that these otters do not have a negative effect on sport fishing – despite being better swimmers than the Cape clawless otter - and a limited ability to travel overland generally confines it to perennial areas of open water where potential stock theft does not really enter the equation. Declining numbers can also be attributed to soil erosion – the consequent muddy water reducing foraging ability also as the animals mainly hunt by sight.

References:

Peter Apps - Wild Ways

Richard Despard Estes - The Behaviour Guide to African Mammals

Compiled by Gus Mills & Lex Hes - The Complete Book of Southern African Mammals

Reay HN Smithers - Land Mammals of Southern Africa, A field guide

Chris & Mathilde Stuart - Stuarts' Field Guide to Mammals of Southern Africa

A final note – we have a Whatsapp group – Wakkies Bird Club - on which members can instantly report any particularly interesting sightings so that everybody with access to Whatsapp is aware and may be able to drop everything and go to look for themselves!

That's it for now, hope you enjoy this latest version!

Yours in birding,

Brian.

