

Stiffnecks
SANParks Forum Birdclub
 This club is for members of the SANParks forum who have an interest in bird life. Although field excursions will be organised, the club will focus on including a wider spectrum of people through the online forum and newsletters.
 Email: pridebuild@telkomsa.net
www.sanparks.org/groups/birders

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EDITORIAL

A Birder's View.

Words by Dianne Tipping-Woods

My boyfriend is a birder. He gets excited about all kinds of birds. No opportunity for a quick ID passes him by. No trip goes by without sudden stops or wild swerves as his eyes follow a small flying object instead of staying on the road. Increasingly I offer to drive. The bird book and the binoculars are our constant companions. Weekends away are planned according to endemic species, seasons and what "lifers" he can add to his list. And alarmingly when he starts talking birding to me, my heart flutters a little faster...the truth is that birding is hot.

My boyfriend is not alone in his fascination with birding. This pass time/hobby/passion is one of the fastest growing forms of out door recreation in the world, second only to gardening. South Africa dedicates a week to birding with the SASOL Birdlife SA National Bird Week that runs from the 30 April to the 6 May to celebrate birding and educate people about South Africa's extraordinary wealth of birdlife. The number of birding clubs, organizations and routes continues to expand countrywide.

Something must explain why what was for years the domain of "boring old tickers and twitchers", has found a new following amongst young and varied demographics.

I approach a number of birders on the SANParks forums for answers. "Well", laughs Francois, "birding is so accessible. You can even do it on your way to work in peak hour traffic". That's a good point, but it can't all be about accessibility?

"It's affordable" adds Wildtuintman, another member who lists birding as a hobby, "all you need is a pair of binoculars and a field guide". Is birding hot because it's cheap?

"I think it appeals to us in the way that a treasure hunt would," says Jay, who has just started a forum bird club, "you never know what you will discover when out birding". So birding is intriguing, a pastime full of promise...

The answers keep coming. "Birding gets us outdoors", "it's sociable", "it's competitive in a good way", "it has an array really awesome "toys" to aspire to like digital SLR cameras, binoculars, spotting scopes, PDA's, GPS's"... It's enough to make any cool young thing's heart beat faster.

"Birding is also something you can control" adds KNPSpokesperson, which is an important factor in our busy lives. You can bird in your garden, while on a business trip or while hiking in remote mountains. You can be a casual birder, or a twitcher or researcher or bird ringer or just about 100 other birding related things, depending on your interests and level of enthusiasm.

The typecast "tickers and twitchers" of old were negatively stereotyped as obsessive, pedantic and ruthless in their pursuit of the next bird. Today it's harder than ever to pin down a birder, especially if you come across one without the usual birding paraphernalia-the book, the 'nobbies' and the list. They look suspiciously like ordinary people and although you will doubtless find a few "old school" birders lurking in the bushes, for the most part, anyone you meet could be a birder.



Photo: Jackie During



© Kalja Seehagen

In recognition of this, all levels of birder are catered for with a range of handy field guides, books, magazines and websites out there just for the birding fraternity.

And as KNPSpokesperson points out birding is an easy way to start understanding ecosystems and the environment, and environmentalism is “in”. Many people discover that while birding, their senses become keener and they tend to see all sorts of other smaller plants, insect and animals that they might not have seen when looking for the so-called ‘big 5’. “I always tell people that when you go to a nature reserve to only look at animals that is all you will see. But if you go to watch birds you will also see the animals” says Francoisd.

“And although you can bird anywhere, it also takes you places” adds Wildtuinman. South Africa specifically has the advantage of a large range of biomes which are home to over 800 species of bird so many different areas deliver many different birds. This is a good point. While you don’t have to plan a trip specifically for birding, the birder invariably does start planning holidays and trips to places they may not otherwise have visited. They can do this alone, or in groups, and regardless of age. Birding doesn’t discriminate based on age or physical fitness, and you can do it all year round. This kind of avi-tourism is positive in economic terms as well, and this potential is just starting to be explored in South Africa

“Many people don’t really give birds a thought” says Francoisd. They see doves and sparrows and think that’s all there are. There is so much out there-and with that comes the constant challenge of adding to ones list. Birds can be ambiguous too- there’s room for field notes, comparisons, analysis and debate.

There is the camaraderie of birding, the thrill of the big tick, the excitement of a spotting a vagrant. There’s also the tranquil feeling of simply watching birds go about their lives. Not to mention the beauty of the birds themselves, their colours, their feathers, their calls, the freedom of their flight and the thrill of their full throated song. Even the names of birds, even common ones, are intriguing: the lilac breasted roller, the black crowned night heron, and the crowned plover or is that lapwing? My heart begins to flutter once more...

“I love birding because it makes you more knowledgeable than the person that doesn't bird” jokes my boyfriend, as he breaks into his woodland kingfisher whistle. I laugh, and conclude that more than being a hobby/pastime/passion, birding is about how you see the world. It’s about beauty, passion, conservation, exploration, knowledge, skill, relaxation, mystery, intrigue, quality time, friendship, excitement, identification, pursuit, patience. And yes, birding **is** hot.

NEWS

On Saturday 9 June 2007, I (Jay) attended a West Coast Honorary Rangers meeting in lieu of the Stiffnecks becoming affiliated with them. The meeting was fruitful and the Stiffnecks will in future be seeking the advice of the very experienced WCNP HR’s when it comes to fundraising as well as doing so in conjunction with said group. For

this we, The Stiffnecks, are truly grateful and we look forward to a mutually beneficial partnership. Thank you especially to Mike Lodge for the warm and enthusiastic welcome ☺

RARE AND INTERESTING BIRD SIGHTINGS

Bush Baptists' Trip to Wilderness Fri 27 Apr – Tue 1 May 2007

Birds (59 Species)

Apalis Bar throated	Avocet Pied	Batis Cape
Boubou Southern	Bulbul Cape	Buzzard Forest
Buzzard Jackal	Canary Brimstone	Coot Red knobbed
Cormorant Reed	Cormorant White chested	Coucal Burchell's
Crow Black	Crow Pied	Dabchick
Darter	Dove Cape turtle	Dove Laughing
Dove Red eyed	Drongo fork tailed	Duck White backed
Duck Yellowbilled	Egret Cattle	Egret Little
Flycatcher Fiscal	Goose Egyptian	Goshawk Pale chanting
Gull Kelp	Gull Hartlaub's	Heron Black Headed
Heron Grey	Ibis Hadeda	Ibis Sacred
Kingfisher Giant	Kingfisher Pied	Kite Black shouldered
Lapwing Blacksmith	Kestrel Rock	Martin Brown throated
Moorhen	Mousebird Redfaced	Ostrich
Pigeon Feral	Raven white necked	Shrike Fiscal
Sparrow Cape	Spoonbill	Spurfowl Rednecked
Starling Black bellied	Starling Eurasian	Starling Pied
Starling Red winged	Swift White rumped	Tern Common
Turaco Knysna	Wagtail Cape	Waxbill Common
Weaver Cape	White-eye Cape	

If anyone would like to submit there sightings lists to the newsletter please email: pridebuild@telkomsa.net

FOOD FOR GARDEN BIRDS

As promised in the first newsletter, the recipe for suet pudding: Purchase animal fat (suet) from your local butcher. Melt the fat in a pot on the stove. To this melted fat add bird seed, bread crumbs and nuts. Pour the mixture into a mould (soap moulds work very well) and allow to set. Place the suet cakes in the freezer and place on your feeder once in a while.

You can also place some bone meal on your feeder as this is a very good source of calcium for your birds.

A GOOD IDEA

For Saffies: Many of you will have seen the street vendors selling ornamental birds, reptiles and other creatures fashioned from scrap metal. Why not ask them to make bird feeders which you can stick into the ground? It is

environmentally friendly, is a source of income for the unemployed and provides you with a very attractive bird feeder ☺



Verreaux's Eagle Owl *bubo lacteus*

Description: This is the largest owl in Africa, ranging in size from 60-71cm with a wingspan of up to 2m a weight of up to 4kg. The pink eyelids are distinctive; it also has very dark brown eyes which appear black in colour. It is a dark brown to light grey colouring with fine barring.



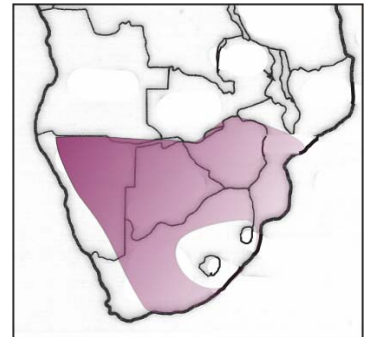
Photo:
Georgi
Kipling

Habitat: typically found in riverine forests but also in bushveld and savannah.

Status: It is not threatened as yet, but is becoming rarer in its range due to habitat destruction.

Distribution: Sub-Saharan Africa; not at high altitudes.

Feeding Habits: It is an opportunistic hunter will feed on rodents, bats, hedgehogs and other birds. Will also catch fish.



Pel's Fishing Owl *Scotopelia peli*

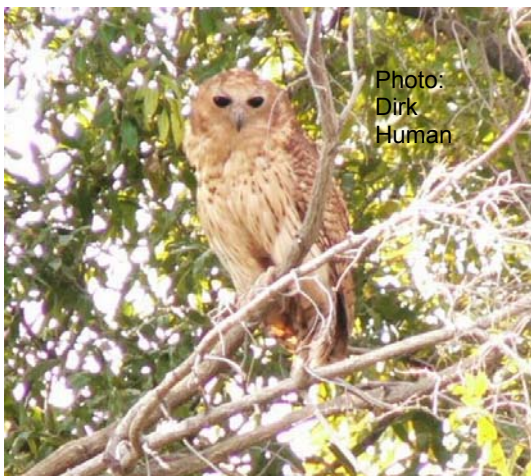
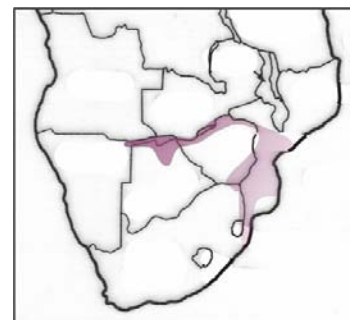


Photo:
Dirk
Human

Description: This is a large owl, reaching some 63cm in length. It has no distinctive facial markings but its reddish brown colouration render it unmistakable. It will "puff up" its head feathers when startled.

Habitat: Found along rivers where they use overhanging trees as perches to fish from. It prefers lush riverine forest to hide in.

Status: This is a rare, localised bird due to a preferred niche.



Distribution: Sub-Saharan Africa along rivers and swamps.

Feeding habits: Predominantly feed on fish but also hunt baby crocodiles, reptiles and crabs.

Note: collect these bird pages and compile a bird guide ☺

“HOLY GRAIL” VIA A YEEHA WORMHOLE TRIP

Words by Johan van Rensburg

When Jay asked me to supply my list of birds that would constitute my “holy grail”, it was shortly before deeftes and francoisd (plus a few others chipping away to create a jumbo list of Southern African super-mega extra-special birds) launched Bush Baptist’s “crazy idea” to find out how many Southern African birds forumites have seen COLLECTIVELY. By the time of writing this note our birders have reduced the list to around 220 from a starting tally of about 950! Well, seeing as my personal list of Southern African birds SEEN are standing at 372, my “holy grail” would hold very little entertainment value and would probably draw zero reaction (that is if you don’t count “ag, shame”!).

In order to put pay to a hastily made promise I must contribute something for our Stiffnecks newsletter, so here goes...

A while back I missed out on a Wormhole Yeehaa trip with Jose* at the helm, DinkyBird*, MATTHYS*, simonb6*, gwendolen*, Richardt* and Mafunyane* as passengers (with navigational privileges). Here was an opportunity to tick some spectacular birds as Jose is a Wormhole Yeehaa pilot of note, knowing her centuries from her millennia – a distinguished space cadet that could have taken us to see:



- 1) The **giant elephant birds**, which were native to Madagascar and have been extinct since at least the 16th century. *Aepyornis* was the world's largest bird, believed to have been over three metres tall and weighing more than 500 kilograms. Remains of *Aepyornis* adults and eggs have been found; in some cases the eggs have a circumference of over one meter and a length up to 34 cm. The egg volume is about 160 times greater than a chicken egg.

- 2) The **Dodo**, *Raphus cucullatus* was a meter-high flightless bird related to the pigeons that lived on the islands of Mauritius. The dodo, which has been extinct since the mid-late 17th century, lived on fruit and nested on the ground. The dodo is commonly used as an example of extinction, due to its extinction occurring during recorded human history and being directly attributable to human activity... “as dead as a dodo” is an unfortunate reference to the dodo's extinct status. The Dodo had greyish plumage, a 23-centimetre bill with a hooked point, very small wings, stout yellow legs and a tuft of curly feathers high on its rear end. Dodos were very large birds, weighing about 23 kg. The sternum was insufficient to support flight; these ground-bound birds evolved to take advantage of an island



ecosystem with no predators. The dodo was considered rather unpalatable, and usually were only killed out of curiosity or boredom.

- 3) The **Red Rail**, *Aphanapteryx bonasia*, is an extinct rail from the island of Mauritius. The Red Rail was a flightless bird, somewhat larger than a chicken. Its plumage was reddish brown all over, and the feathers were fluffy and hair like; the tail was not visible in the living bird and the short wings likewise also nearly disappeared in the plumage. It had a long, slightly curved, brown bill and comparatively (for a rail) long legs. Altogether, it resembled a lean kiwi more than a rail. The rail was hunted to extinction (1710) in the century after its discovery. The Red Rail was a popular gamebird for the Dutch and French settlers. While it could usually make good its escape when chased, it was easily lured by showing the birds a red cloth, which they approached to attack. The birds could then be picked up, and their cries when held would draw more individuals to the scene, as the birds, which had evolved in the absence of predators, were curious and not afraid of humans. As it nested on the ground, pigs which ate their eggs and young probably contributed to its extinction.



Note-: *Since 1500, over 140 species of birds have become extinct world-wide, and according to experts, this rate of extinction seems to be increasing.*

- *These are SANParks forum and Stiffnecks' members, if you would like to become a member or simply read the forum debates and activities, go to <http://www.sanparks.org/forums>*

BIRD IDENTIFICATION 101

Words by Deefstes

This is a quick write-up to serve as a rough guide to bird identification for beginners. I will not deal with the specifics of certain species or families (at least not yet) but rather some broad spectrum tips & tricks that might help you arrive at an ID, or at the very least narrow down your options.

Any budding birdwatcher will know just how daunting it can be when you see a bird in the field and then frantically start paging through your field guide, not knowing where to start. We need to find a way to avoid this frantic paging through the field guide as it not only wastes valuable time that you could have spent observing the bird but also it's well....stupid. The first step in bird identification is to attempt to narrow down your options so you only need to page through a few pages (or only one). If you know your field guide well enough and you know what to look for when seeing a bird, you can often narrow it down to a page or two.

So how do you get to know your field guide and how do you know what to look for? First of all, spend time with your field guide. Page through it at leisure when you're at home. In time you will develop a feel for where the different groups of birds are placed in the book. I often don't even use a field guide when I'm birding anymore but I still find myself paging through my field guide just for the enjoyment of it.

Secondly, know how to observe in order to find the bird in the field guide. Always try to observe the bird for as long as possible. Birders are often tempted to turn straight to the field guide after a cursory glance at the bird. You'd be surprised just how little detail the mind actually absorbs and once you're paging through the field guide you often find that you can't remember what you saw anymore. Often times the bird is not there when you try to have a second look. Remember, the field guide will be there in a few minutes, but the bird might not be.

It can also be very useful to have a notebook or even a Dictaphone handy to record the features that you see. It may sound silly but it certainly helps when you're going through your field guide and you can't quite remember if the rump was brown or grey.

So which features do we look for? The most striking features are not necessarily always the ones by which the bird can be identified. You might see a Tern with a big black cap and only when you start looking at the field guide notice that just about every Tern in the book has a big black cap. Obviously every family group have unique features to be aware of and I will try to address that in future articles but for now, let's stick to the general features common to most birds.

Size: What is the size of the bird? Field guides often give sizes in cm (bill tip to tail) which can be misleading. The Grey Go-away-bird for instance measures 45-50cm, as does the Steppe Buzzard. So don't try to be too precise with the size measurements. It helps to use other birds as a comparison scale. You can ask yourself, is the bird the size of a White-eye, a Sparrow, a Thrush, a Coucal or a Crow?

Bill: The shape and size of the bill often helps a great deal in narrowing down the options. The question to ask is "what would the bird be eating with a bill like that?" Generally speaking, bill types can be classified into the following groups:

- **Seed eaters:** Stubby conical beaks suitable for cracking seeds. Buntings, Canaries and Waxbills are good examples of seed eaters.

- *Insect eaters:* Longer, pointed beaks suitable for probing into tight spaces. Chats, Flycatchers and Pipits are good examples of insect eaters.
- *Fruit eaters:* Short and strong beaks but perhaps not as conical as seedeaters. Turacos, Mousebirds and Barbets are good examples of fruit eaters.
- *Carnivores:* Larger and strong beaks, often with a hook, suitable for ripping flesh. Shrikes, Tchagras and Boubous are good examples of carnivores.
- *Nectar feeders:* Long, decurved beaks, suitable for reaching nectar at the bottom of flowers. Sunbirds and Sugarbirds are obvious examples of nectar feeders.

There are obviously birds with very unique beaks that don't fall into any of these categories but they are generally easy to identify. Unfortunately there are also birds such as Rollers or Coucals with beaks matching two or more categories or birds such as Swifts that are definitely insect eaters but with beaks differing from most other insect eaters.

The important thing is, pay attention to the shape and the size of the bill. It is often a good feature to work from and in most cases more constant across the population of a given species than plumage colouration.

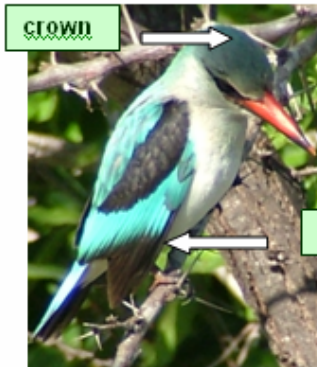
Bare Parts: Pay attention to the colour of the bird's eyes and legs. A bird's plumage may be hard to separate from a closely matched family member when the colour of the eye or the legs can still clinch an ID.

Plumage Features: Take note of any supercilium (eyebrow), wing bars, specific colour



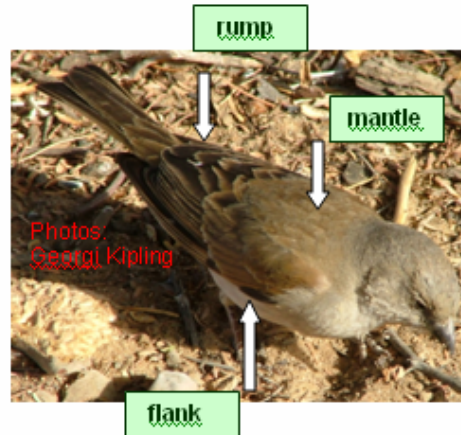
of the outer tail feathers, tail tip, subterminal band on the tail, tail barring, the colour of the rump, flanks, mantle and streaking on the breast, mantle and crown. When the bird is seen in flight, take note of the underwing pattern, any specific colour to the leading edge, trailing edge, wing tips or carpal patches.

Habitat: Some birds can be very specific as to their habitat



reference. Seeing a Melodious Lark in the bushveld would be pretty much impossible, prompting the question if you're not looking at a Monotonous Lark which is specifically a bushveld bird.

Voice: This can be a very daunting concept for beginner birders but the bird's call or song can often clinch an otherwise hopeless ID. A Nightjar sitting in plain view on the road in



your car's headlights could be impossible to identify, until it starts calling and it becomes the easiest identification ever.

Habit: Birds sometimes have their little "mannerisms" which can make it much easier to identify them. A short tailed Cisticola perched on a wire can be any one of five species but there's only one bird that flies like a Zitting Cisticola.

Deefstes will be doing a series of follow up articles, providing ID tips related for each bird family.