

Stiffnecks Newsletter : Volume2, No 1, 2008

Editorial

Dear Stiffnecks,

The year has started off on several good notes, the first being the West Rand participated in and thoroughly enjoyed! Then due to popular demand, the newsletter will now be available both on the website and as a downloadable pdf file. We have also started a facebook group, which quite a few of you have already joined; hopefully this will become a great spot to chat, swap ideas and ID birds we are all too nervous to ask the expert twitchers to do.



We hope to take the club to new heights this year, and in so saying, Bush Baptist and Johan van Rensburg club have offered their services as official birdclub outing organisers. So, should any club members in their respective areas wish to plan an outing, or if any of our international members should be visiting SA, please contact BB or JvR and they will arrange Stiffnecks' outing of note.

Yours in birding,
Jay

News

The Bird List part 1: tick a bum

Are you a ticker, a lister, a twitcher, a birder or a birdwatcher? Why does adding the Grey Wagtail to your Excel-spreadsheet provoke an adrenaline rush? Do you prefer a long life list or would you rather be able to identify a cisticola? In this brand new series JoelR explores the soul of the bird list and its composer.

Words by by JoelR

"...this bird list compulsion thing has me fascinated and the poor novices completely intimidated..."
(Taken from Bird Philosophy: Volume 1, Western Cape Publishing, 2008)

The black bum wriggled a bit and then vanished into the scenery of green and wet summer pastels. About 86 meters further an excited little gathering paced up and down the causeway, equipped with binoculars, a spotting scope and a ticking urge.

Four fortunate ones had seen the then airborne bum appearing out of nowhere they had seen it landing and they had seen it waterskiing off to some secluded patch of greenery. Most significantly, the quartet had seen the predominantly yellow bill of the water bird, realizing it was the sought after, dark, subtropical branch of the *Gallinula* family: the Lesser Moorhen. Hence the excitement.

The other ten party members merely managed to score a glance of the wriggling behind, which over that distance looks just like the derriere of a Common Moorhen, a very common moorhen. Disappointedly enough I was one of these ten and being on the lookout specifically for this lesser creature I had to settle for this glimpse. According to others I had set my eyes on a Lesser Moorhen, but I had not really *seen* it no lifer. Better luck next time. However, much to my amazement a good number of people enthusiastically whooped out their pdas and noted the elusive little black thing down on their list.

Nightjar, shouted someone a week later. It was one of those Saturday mornings where semi-funny people make jokes about early birds a few times too many. Location was the Mahonie loop, Punda Maria area, Kruger National Park. Occasion was the Birding Weekend. And lets call our leading actress Mrs. Tick. While the occupants of the game drive vehicle tried to identify the night bird in 2 seconds sharp, Mrs. Tick was studying her pda. As usual we failed to pin down *die naguil* but our guide suggested with some you-cant-prove-me-wrong bravado that it was probably a European Nightjar.

Then the dawn blurred and the Mahonie loop appeared in slow motion. Mrs. Tick looked up with a brief triumphant grin (which in other circumstances must have looked like a friendly smile) and she hovered down her magic pda pen. Astonishment and disbelief clammed my dry throat as I realized what I just had witnessed. While we had been breathing the cool morning air, while we had been admiring the strange nocturnal creature on the road, while we had inconclusively discussed its features, Mrs. Tick had added the European Nightjar to her life list.

Yet another week later somebody asked me: Is a bird list about birding or is it a symptom of 21st century living: instant gratification with fierce competitiveness? I had never thought about the black, wriggling bum and about Mrs. Tick so deeply and went silent. Are bird lists actually about birds or merely a modern compensation for the absence of the hunt? Now this I had heard before and I decided to take this challenge and actually try to answer these questions.

And as willing souls tend to get overloaded, more questions arose. Should one be trying to reach the end of the Southern African bird list within a few years? Does this then really mean anything? Surely a bird count of 800 plus should be a badge of honour, something worn by someone who has gone the distance, had a mentor, learnt all about birds though many many years in the company of birds and learned mentors or experience....does running from one spot to another, all nicely highlighted by some previous person, to tick off birds have any significance at all?

Next time in **The Bird List part 2: hunter gatherer**

Last year I installed a bird database on my laptop. It took me two months to admit to my girlfriend that I actually paid 25 US Dollar for this download

Rare and Interesting Bird Sightings: Stiffnecks December Birding



Pix: Wanderw and Michele Nel

Bontebok National Park: Words by Wanderw

Bontebok NP was a great park to visit. The birding was exceptional. Highlights were seeing Black Harriers every day, a very curious Cardinal Woodpecker inspecting an Acacia Pied Barbet's nest in a dead tree, an up close Hamerkop and a lovely Paradise Flycatcher. And to that the Red Bishops, Pintailed Whydah, Blue Cranes etc,etc.....the list goes on and on, and to top it off some sightings and the daily cry of the Fish Eagle. Can't wait to go back!

Kgalagadi National Park: Words by Michele Nel

I found that Martial Eagles, Secretary Birds, Lanner Falcons, Tawny Eagles as well Black Chested Snake Eagles were very much in abundance. We also had a few good sightings of Bateleurs. Always a highlight especially the adult ones. I was disappointed in the absence of the smaller birds eg. bee-eaters, lilac breasted rollers and crimson breasted shrikes. Of course there were many LBJ's that I could not identify because they persisted in flitting off. One LBJ that I was able to identify though was a sabota lark but unfortunately I did not get a photo of it. That was my only lifer on this trip.

Birds that I saw in the park for the first time were Hadeda Ibis, Black Stork and Spotted Thick -Knee. Verreaux's Eagle Owls were in abundance and I had one sighting of a spotted eagle owl. We saw hordes of Kori Bustards and the Ludwig's Bustard on two occasions.

The best highlight of all must be the sighting of the Black Stork at Rooibrak. He was not in the mood for a photo and we were reversing to try and get a better view when my SO noticed a leopard walking up behind the car towards the waterhole. There was a huge Martial Eagle in the tree as well as a Kori Bustard prancing around. A car came from the opposite direction and we beckoned to them to come forward because they would then have a better view of the leopard which by now was drinking at the waterhole. They ignored us at first but then drove slowly towards us and pulled up alongside our car and wound down the window. The conversation went something like this:

The man (very excitedly)"Isn't that a beautiful Martial Eagle in the tree. It is the first time we have seen one."

SO (astounded) "Yes, but what about the leopard ?"

The man (shocked) " Leopard? What Leopard ????"

SO (even more astounded) " The leopard drinking at the waterhole !!! "

The man's face was an absolute picture. In all the excitement of seeing the Martial Eagle they had not noticed the leopard.

Thanks to the stork we saw the leopard but the exact opposite happened to them...thanks to the Eagle they almost missed the leopard. The joys of Birding!!!!

If anyone would like to submit their sightings lists to the newsletter please

Email: pridebuild@telkomsa.net

Plants for Bird Friendly Gardens: Sage Wood

Sage wood (*Buddleia salviifolia*) is an indigenous fast growing plant, loved by birds and butterflies. During summer its scented white flower spikes are long-lasting and are carried so heavily on the branches, making for a roundly shaped bush. This 3 - 5m high shrub is ideal for your full sun to semi-shade areas without frost. It tolerates drought, demands well-draining & rich soil, with spring feeding and pruning after flowering. Propagate from cuttings.

Source: <http://www.gardeningeneden.co.za/plants-buddleia-salviifolia.html>

Bird Identification 101: Storks

Words by Deefstes

This article will deal briefly with the identification of Storks. There really is very little possibility of confusion and even the beginner should have no problem separating the various Storks.

When the birds are seen on the ground there are enough features by which they can easily be identified and confusion will most likely only exist when a bird is seen in flight. Consequently, this article will deal primarily with the features visible when the birds are seen in flight.

Black Stork vs. Abdims Stork:

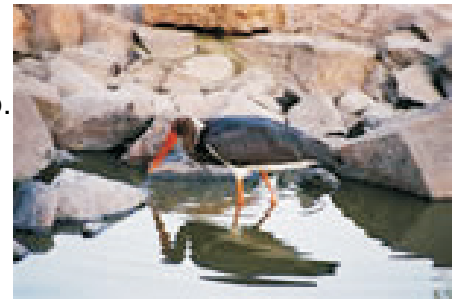
The very first feature by which these two birds are separated is undoubtedly the red bill and legs that the Black Stork has in contradistinction to the horn coloured bill with dull red tip and blue facial skin of Abdims Stork as well as the grey legs with dull red joints and feet.

When in flight, these features should also be clear enough to secure an ID o more features by which the bird can be identified. The easier one of the two would be by looking at the extent of the white feathers on the underparts. Both birds have a white body with some white wing coverts. On Black Stork however there will be a black leading edge to the wing while the white coverts of Abdims Stork will extend all the way to the leading edge. Put differently, when seen from below, the black head of Abdims Stork will be separated from the black wings by the white wing coverts while on Black Stork the black head will be connected to the black wings by a black strip along the leading edge of the wing.

The second feature, which can only be seen if the bird banks and the back can be observed, is that of the colour of the birds back. Black Stork has an all black back and rump while Abdims Stork has a white lower back and rump. It may be worth mentioning that Abdims Stork is also much more gregarious than Black Stork and it would be highly unusual to see more than a dozen Black Storks together while Abdims Stork could well occur in numbers upwards of a hundred.

Marabou Stork, odd as it ay seem, can also be confused with the above two species when seen in flight (by a very careless birder). Apart from Marabou being significantly bigger than Black Stork, which in turn is about twice as big as Abdims Stork (in terms of body weight), another easy feature to look out for is the length of the neck. While Marabou Stork has no shorter neck than the other storks, it does retract its neck while in flight.

That said, Marabou Stork really should not be confused for the two Black Storks as it is huge in comparison. In fact, Marabou shares the distinction of having the largest wingspan of any land bird with Andean Condor and the wings do indeed remind of Vultures rather than Storks.



White Stork vs. Yellow-billed Stork:

Again, any reasonable view of White Stork or Yellow-billed Stork should be Enormous yellow bill of the latter distinguishes it immediately from anything else. With long range, in flight views, it may be useful having knowledge of one or two identification features however.

Both birds have black flight feathers and white coverts making them look superficially similar from below but the colour of the tail is a dead giveaway and should be looked for immediately should the colour of the bill not be White Stork will always show an all white tail while Yellow-billed Stork has a black tail with white under tail coverts.



Note: collect these bird pages and compile a bird guide

Events

Stiffnecks Big Birding Weekend

Words by Johan van Rensburg

I received a few interesting reminders of birding facts during the Stiffnecks recent trip to Mopani things one knows but need refreshing every now and then. I was intrigued by the prospect of listing birds after identifying them by sound during the dawn chorus at the confluence lookout on the Tsende River during the Kruger birding weekend. Listening to the worlds oldest wake-up call the dawn chorus and celebrating the beauty of bird song is a personal experience as old as I am, for I have always been an early riser and constantly enjoy the sounds of nature at the start of a day. But to know which bird makes which sound as surely as if you have seen it that was fascinating to observe. Chris Patton and Michael Paxton are hugely accomplished at identifying bird calls and they generously shared their experience and skill with us.

Unfortunately for me I am at a disadvantage due to industrial noise induced hearing loss I will never be able to hear all the bird sounds the younger birders pick up with their keen ears. I was thoroughly frustrated by ID calls made on sounds I could not even hear. I had to be content learning about the ones I could hear.

Novice birders generally tend to be concerned with only the visual elements of bird identification and often forget this very powerful element, the sounds made by birds and this is rarely fully exploited. All keen bird watchers develop a strong sense of sight to identify birds by discrete markings such as colour of wing bars and eye rings. Without going that one step further youll never become the expert birder. In fact, many expert bird watchers rely on their hearing to a greater degree than sight to identify birds. Not just bird calls or bird songs are learnt, but all the sounds birds make, such as wing sounds and bill rattles.

Obviously one can hear many more birds than one can see on most field trips. It's great fun and as much a rewarding challenge to identify birds by their sounds as by their appearance and behaviour but the skill is honed over many years of observation and dedicated study.

The dawn chorus starts before sunrise with one or two birds singing, usually starting with robins and thrushes and followed by spurfowl and francolins. Gradually more birds of various species join in until there is a symphony of song. The birds sing, they talk, they whinny and squawk and squeak. They chip and chirp and clack, and they cry and crow and caw. Some ducks quack, some whistle, some peep or screech. Some birds bark or croak or grunt or grumble. Many species, at one time or another, mutter and mumble and whisper.

The purpose of the dawn chorus is not really known, though there are several possible explanations:

- The air is cooler at dawn and sound travels further;

- Conditions for searching for food are less favourable around dawn;

- Male birds are guarding their territories and mates from the competition;

- Mostly it is the male bird that sings, though there are exceptions. It is thought that their singing influences the females reproductive cycle and nest building.

- Greeting each other and telling each other about good feeding spots;

- Youngsters letting their parents know they're hungry.

But whatever the reason, the outcome is a boon for the birder that gets to know the songs of the birds he wants to list.

One of the most obvious advantages of using audio struck me as providing an interface for visually disabled users to enjoy birding. However the use of sound offers a number of other advantages for all users. Generally speaking, sound calls for attention and is unique in its ability to alert observers to specific information. It provides immediate communication that the onlooker cannot accidentally fail to notice. Sound influences how we identify and interpret information. Side by side with a visual image sound will have the effect of shaping perceptions and interpretations.

We know all kinds of audio cues in daily life: cars beeping their horns, the alert of a computer turning on, the ring of a mobile phone... If we embrace the notion of incorporating sound into our birding it must enhance the experience.

I like the analogy: try playing a computer game with the sound turned off does the sense of involvement diminish? Without the aural feedback the game becomes more difficult to play!

The dawn chorus had us all interacting, we were profoundly involved as we focussed on the challenge to hear a new sound and make an ID. Fun! What a memorable way to start the day. The dawn chorus happens at a time of day when the light is too low for seeing and this listening activity can fill in that otherwise dead birding time.

A number of aids have been made available commercially to help with learning bird songs and to assist in the ID of birds. This is critical in becoming a good birder some ID calls are virtually impossible to make without noting the song of the bird, notably some pipits, cisticolas, nightjars, warblers and larks, to name a few. Many of these aids have interfaces that allow the user to play games and learn the songs and sounds of birds that way.

Onomatopoeia (on-ah-mat-ah-PEE-ah) means to use language to describe what we hear. Words like swish, thump, and gurgle are onomatopoeia. Ornithologists use this term to describe bird calls or songs. For example, the song of the African emerald cuckoo sounds like "pretty geor-gie!" and the Namaqua sandgrouse call coc au vin or kelkie wyn. Learning the skill to describe sounds with words can assist bird ID as well.

Birds vocal sounds can be classified into calls that are used to give alarm, maintain contact within a flock, beg for food, etc. and songs that are used to attract mates and defend territories. While this arbitrary distinction may be useful in identifying different species it is also useful to understand how birds learn to make these sounds and, indeed, how they make them.

Scientists have gathered evidence that suggests birds are both born with a basic ability and vocabulary to sing, but that they also copy or mimic their parent's calls and songs and those of other mature birds. A juvenile bird will usually start to sing with a subdued jumble of notes called sub-song.

Some species, such as some Starlings and Robins, take their ability to mimic to the extreme and often mimic the sounds of other species and machines, such as wolf whistles and car alarms.

As well as developing their singing, there is also evidence that having an extensive repertoire of songs either impresses females or frightens the competing males.

A bird's vocal cord, or syrinx, is simpler than that found in humans. Instead of being located in the larynx (Adam's apple) at the top of the wind-pipe (trachea), it is located at the bottom, much closer to the lungs. The avian larynx at the top of the trachea does not serve any purpose in vocalisation and only prevents food and water from entering the lungs.

Sound is generated when air flowing through the narrow syringeal passage causes the tympanic membrane to vibrate in the same way a drum skin vibrates when struck. The muscles alter the tension of the tympanic membrane, like tightening a drum skin, and this alters the frequency or pitch of the notes. The position of the syrinx, at the top of the two bronchi, means that birds can sing two different notes simultaneously.

Individuals of a species sing different songs with different "words" and "phrases" than another individual, and the same species from different territories sing about different things in different ways.

The dawn chorus occurs because as winter retreats, male songbirds sing to attract potential females, protect their territory and to warn off other males. However, as soon as it is light enough to look for food, the dawn chorus comes to a close which is why you have to be an early bird to hear it.

Michael Paxton is a young KNP ranger. Some of the funniest comments I have ever heard about buffalo came from him.

"A buffalo looks at you as if you owe it money."

"A great hunter once answered when asked why he hunted Cape buffalo with a .458 because they don't make a .854!"



Red-billed oxpecker juveniles (left) have a dark rump just like the adult. Yellow-billed oxpecker (right) juveniles have a light buff coloured rump.

OK, why am I on about buffalo in a birding news letter? Well, because they are host to my ex-bogey bird, the yellow-billed oxpecker. Some time after the dawn chorus we encountered a huge buffalo herd that had a mix of red- and yellow-billed oxpeckers hanging around. Unfortunately for me the yellow-billed oxpeckers were all juveniles and were not yet showing the distinct beak and eye features. Although both Michael and Chris confirmed the oxpecker ID I decided to hold back on adding to my list until I could research the subject a bit more thoroughly. As things turned out, we had great views of adult yellow-billed oxpeckers near Olifants Camp the following day. But curious is my middle name and research revealed some very interesting facts

To differentiate between young red- and yellow-billed oxpeckers are actually very easy if you know what to look for. Again the sound that the birds make is one way, but I am back on the visual bandwagon.

North & South Stiffnecks meet by Pete Sumner

Owing to my Dad having an unfortunate accident, I traveled up to Gauteng from the Cape for a week. All work (i.e. hospital visiting) and no play make Pete a dull boy, so I decided to go early morning birding. I put out a call to Gautengers, and it was answered by Johan van Rensburg. I had made myself a tentative list of Gauteng birds, and met him at Marievale, south of Springs, on the Sunday morning, at a time that Capeys have never heard of. I parked my dad's Merc and we went in Johan's better-suited Landy, and immediately struck up a good friendship. This happened easily, I am sure, via the interaction we had previously had on the forum.

During the next few hours, we were quite fortunate with our sightings. Marievale is essentially a wetland skirted by grasslands. Johan knows his stuff, and it did not take me long to tick off new species, as well as reinforce others that I had not often seen. It was a pleasant time, not without humour. Johan nearly reversed off a bridge into the drink, and at one get out stop, I landed my feet in 3cm mud, most of which I was able to remove, but hey a Landy is supposed to get dirty!

5 lifers later, we parted, and Johan was happy with his grass owl lifer he had seen on the way to Marievale. Two things that impressed me were that the birds were more or less where Johan had expected them to be, not like the Cape where it is hit (and mostly) miss, and the glorious sight of the long tailed widows strutting along above the grasslands just off the main roads.

We were able to meet again the next Saturday to go to Suikerbosrand, but you will have to wait for the next edition for that story. It was great to have a North & South mini mini meet.

Birds we saw were

Avocet Pied	Pipit African
Bishop Red	Plover Blacksmith
Bishop Yellow crowned	Ruff
Bunting Golden breasted	Sandpiper Common
Canary Black throated	Sandpiper Marsh
Chat Stone	Shoveller Cape
Cisticola Leveillant's	Shrike Fiscal
Coot Red knobbed	Snipe African
Cormorant Reed	Spoonbill
Crake Black	Starling Pied
Darter	Stilt Black winged
Duck Yellowbilled	Swallow Barn
Egret Black	Swallow Greater striped
Egret Cattle	Swallow Lesser striped
Egret Little	Teal Hottentot
Grebe Greater crested	Teal Redbilled
Guineafowl Helmeted	Tern Whiskered
Heron Grey	Wagtail Cape
Heron Squacco	Waxbill Common
Ibis Glossy	Weaver Southern masked
Ibis Haded	Wheatear Mountain
Kite Black shouldered	Whydah Pintailed
Martin Brown throated	Widowbird Fantailed
Moorhen	Widowbird Longtailed

Notes

This newsletter is written, compiled and edited by members of the SANParks web forum community.