inbox

We'd like to hear from you, and you are welcome to send us your birding questions, observations or sightings for inclusion in these pages. Accompanying images should be sent as high-res jpgs, and be between 1 and 3MB in size. Send your contributions to *editor@birdlife.org.za*. Letters may be edited for clarity or length. The opinions expressed here do not necessarily reflect the policies of BirdLife South Africa.

TITBIT

Biological control measures have proved very effective in containing the spread of the invasive alien tree, rooikrans *Acacia longifolia*. In 1985 the seed-feeding weevil *Melanterius ventralis* was imported from Australia, and in 1982 a gall wasp, *Trichilogaster acaciaelongifoliae*, was brought in and released in areas where rooikrans was rife. Although neither of these control agents is indigenous to southern Africa, the Southern Grey Tit has learnt that the galls formed by the wasp on the rooikrans buds contain a titbit in the form of a larva. In January 2012 I watched a pair of Southern Grey Tits near Langebaan on the Cape West Coast systematically looking for and breaking open these galls to extract and eat the larvae within.

JESSIE WALTON
Elgin, Western Cape

A TAIL OF **TWO HALVES**

While my husband and I were birding in the Kruger Park during December we encountered this bird with a beautiful 'Christmas tree'-shaped tail. I think it is a Fork-tailed Drongo, but could you confirm that I have identified it correctly and, if this tail shape is commonly seen, tell me what causes it?

Thanks for a great magazine.

MARANDA KRUGER, Via e-mail

Professor Andrew McKechnie comments: It is indeed a Fork-tailed Drongo, and it is undergoing moult and re-growing its tail feathers. The species account in *Sasol Birds of Southern Africa* has an illustration of this (perhaps not as spectacular as the bird pictured here). All birds periodically replace their feathers, as the latter get damaged through physical wear and tear and degraded through microbial action. In the case of the Fork-tailed Drongo, the fork at the end of the rectrices results in this 'Christmas tree' effect.

STRANDED **SCOPS**

Recently I had an unusual sighting while on holiday in Swakopmund, Namibia. We were walking along the beach near the Walvis Bay Salt Works, when a bird suddenly flew up near our feet and landed a short distance away. I was intrigued and when I went to investigate, I was amazed to see that it was an African Scops Owl. I did a bit of research and discovered that the species does frequent coastal forest areas, but this bird was way out of its range.

I managed to spend some time photographing it – it was a real privilege to experience this striking little bird at such close quarters.

ANJA DENKER
Windhoek, Namibia

FACILE **FISHER**

I was interested to read 'Guiding Lights: Outfishing the Fish-Eagles' in the January/February 2013 issue as I had recently coincidentally captured this image at a dam in Elgin, Western Cape.

I was photographing waterskiers in poor weather when I noticed a Yellow-billed Kite flying very low over the choppy water and, to my great surprise, it caught a fish. However, according to *Roberts VII* and as stated in your article, this is not unusual behaviour.

ANDRÉ DEMBLON
Cape Town

Congratulations on your interesting January/February issue. With reference to the piece 'Outfishing', I was with a group of birders at the dam at Tala Nature Reserve, near Camperdown, outside Pietermaritzburg. I was watching a Yellow-billed Kite which appeared to be behaving strangely as it was quartering over the middle of the dam and I wondered if there was a dead frog or fish floating there that it was intent on grasping. Then the kite swooped and caught a wriggling fish, about 20 centimetres long, in one claw.

It didn't get far, though, as the resident African Fish-Eagle flew in and appeared to 'bump' the kite, which then dropped the fish. I was so surprised at the sequence of events that I neglected to check whether the fish-eagle managed to make off with the fish.

JANET LEVY
Via e-mail

GOING INTO **ORBIT**

I was in the Matambeni hide in the Kruger National Park in November when I observed a group of three klipspringers move into the opening in front of the hide. One, which I took to be an adult male, walked to a very exposed area and stood still. Shortly thereafter a male Red-winged Starling landed on his back and worked his way up to the klipspringer's head and began to, seemingly, probe deep into the pre-orbital glands on both sides. My clear impression was that the klipspringer actually presented himself for this service.

I assumed that the starling was probing for insects or parasites but I didn't actually see it pull anything out. Subsequently, looking back at the images, one seems to show the bird pulling something out but it's not clear to me what it is. The process continued for a while and eventually a female Red-winged Starling arrived and also began to work the pre-orbital gland. The klipspringer seemed far less accepting of the female's attempts and pulled away, shook his head and seemed generally less comfortable. Eventually both birds left. The whole event lasted about six minutes.

DAN STRECK
Via e-mail

Professor Adrian Craig comments: Observations of Red-winged Starlings feeding on pre-orbital gland secretions of klipspringers in Zimbabwe were published in *Ostrich* in 1995; the observer, S.C. Roberts, was studying klipspringers and was quite sure that the birds were not feeding on ticks. This information is included under diet of Red-winged Starlings in *Roberts VII*. Grooming of klipspringers for ticks has been reported for Red-winged Starlings from southern and East Africa; in the arid western areas of South Africa and in Namibia, Pale-winged Starlings have a similar relationship with these antelope.

However, feeding on the gland secretions does seem to be less common and may be restricted to certain times of year. One species of tick is attracted to twigs which have been marked by klipspringers as this clearly offers a good chance of encountering a new host, but there is no evidence that the ticks settle around the pre-orbital glands of the mammal; they are found on the underside and less accessible sites. ◆

YOU WIN

In this issue, the winner of the best contribution to our Inbox is Maranda Kruger, who will receive a copy of *Sasol Birds of Southern Africa* (fourth edition), courtesy of Random House Struik. The fourth edition features comprehensively revised text, newly designed plates for ease of use and comparison, as well as more than 380 improved illustrations, updated distribution maps, and calendar bars showing occurrence and months of breeding.

Join the Struik Nature Club (*www.randomstruik.co.za/natureclub*) and you will be the first to know about their new releases, special offers and special editions. In addition, you will be invited to launches and author events and be in line to win great prizes.