

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.



ORANGE-BREADED BUSH-SHRIKE VICTOR SOARES

WAKE-UP CALL

We are all accustomed to hearing bird calls when we wake each morning. From the archetypal rooster crowing in rural areas to birds singing in suburbia, most of us are within earshot of birds vocalising. I would be interested to discover from readers which birds are the ones they most commonly hear first each morning. To do this I would like to conduct a survey in spring, when most of the migrants will have returned and birds will be waking and calling fairly early. I have chosen an arbitrary date of Saturday, 21 September 2013; if there are no birds heard on the day due to bad weather, readers are welcome to record the first bird they hear the following day.

Readers can e-mail the name of the first bird that they hear on the morning of 21 September to bradley@intekom.co.za, together with their location (i.e. where the bird was heard), and their name. Please use 'Early Bird Survey' in the subject line of the e-mail. I look forward to the response from readers. The list of the most common 'early birds' will be published in *African Birdlife* in due course.

BRADLEY GIBBONS



DARTERS The intrigue continues

A couple of articles in the July/August issue captured my attention. The informative 'Hanging out with Darters', which mentions a moulting African Darter seen three metres up a eucalyptus tree and the query as to how it was able to scale up and down, stirred an observation I had at the Lake Panic hide near Skukuza in the Kruger National Park.

I was watching an African Darter perched on the top of a dead tree protruding out of the water. It had clearly developed a thirst and needed to descend to water level to drink. However, instead of flying down, it awkwardly 'climbed' down the branch using its wings and chest in a 'bear hug' position to lever itself, while its webbed feet gave a degree of further impetus. It employed the same process to climb back to the top of the perch. I observed the darter doing this on two occasions.

The article 'Kestrels in the Karoo', in which mention is made of the Amur Falcon and its recorded roosts, was equally interesting. On our way to stay at the Hlalanathi Drakensberg Resort in January this year, we had the thrill of witnessing some 1 500 Amurs flying in to roost. For the past seven years they have taken to using a very large plane tree near the Tower of Pizza Restaurant, which is located just before the Hlalanathi turn-off on the R74 en route to Royal Natal in the Berg. Birders in the area should time a seasonal visit to watch this amazing spectacle.

NORMAN FREEMAN

Via e-mail

I was interested to read the article about the African Darter by Peter Ryan in the July/August issue. My curiosity was piqued because we (the Lakes Bird Club on the Garden Route) recently had the opportunity to observe some of these magnificent birds.

Members who watched the darters were drawn to certain characteristics in particular, two of which are dealt with in the article. The ribbed or corrugated feathers along the bird's back and in the tail led to some theorising and we too thought that it might be to strengthen the feathers used for steering underwater. This is borne out by the fact that in a very simple experiment it is possible to show how a sheet of paper can bear quite an abnormal weight if it is first folded into a concertina pattern. >

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MARIEJIE FRONEMAN

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The second characteristic that we noticed was how the birds spread their wings with their backs to the sun in order to get their body heat going again. Anyone who has walked into freestanding water on a winter's morning in the Free State would understand this!

Something we also observed was how the darter preened. We took some photographs that show the bird bent over backwards and using its bill to push against something that looks like a preen gland, very close to the base of its tail (above). It is also evident that this part of its body has a bald spot, which could indicate continuous 'pecking' in this area (above, right).

Peter Ryan mentions that this species has not been studied in depth and I would therefore like to ask if our observations are valid?

WESSEL ROSSOUW

Via e-mail

Peter Ryan comments: It's great that the article on darters has stimulated interest in these birds. Norman Freeman's photograph of a moulting darter scrambling up a near-vertical dead tree trunk vividly illustrates his fascinating notes. It raises the question

why the bird would go to such lengths to get well above the water. It might reduce the risk of predation by aquatic predators such as crocodiles, but presumably exposes the bird to aerial attack from the likes of African Fish Eagles, especially if it can't easily descend from its perch.

The observations by members of the Lakes Bird Club, reported by Wessel Rossouw, also are worth exploring. The function of wing-spreading in passive heating is well known among cormorants and darters, but the strengthening role of corrugations on some darter feathers is less clear cut. It seems to make sense for the tail feathers, but why also the scapulars? And if it is a functional role associated with diving, why is it more strongly developed in adults? It would be very interesting to test the strength of adult and juvenile tail feathers to see if the corrugations make a difference; if anyone finds a dead darter, please contact me (Peter.ryan@uct.ac.za).

Finally, to the observations of the darter's preen gland. Cormorants and darters have well-developed preen glands and they spend a fair amount of time oiling their feathers, so the bird club members' observations are correct. ♦

YOU WIN

In this issue, the winner of the best contribution to our Inbox is **Norman Freeman**, 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.

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