



A massive FLOCK AT SEA

BirdLife South Africa's 2013 AGM turned into an occasion of note when more than 1 000 birders gathered in Cape Town and set sail on a four-day cruise.

BirdLife South Africa's Annual General Meeting (AGM) is always a festive occasion, being used as a legitimate excuse to travel to a new location and go birding for a weekend and, while you're at it, attend the AGM. It is a gathering of birders, also known as Flock. The 2013 Flock was a little different as it was held on board the gigantic cruise liner *MSC Opera*, which took 1 116 birders from Cape Town to Walvis Bay and back. For many it was their first Flock, their first cruise experience and their first look at real birds (that is, those that eat sea-food for a living).

The itinerary included some intensive birding from the moment the ship left Cape Town harbour on 1 March. All the following day, spent heading north to Walvis Bay, and during all of 4 March, we had a rotation system for guides stationed at six decks to help find and identify birds. With so many eyes on the look out and with hand-held radios being used by guides to communicate between decks, it's likely that every single bird that passed within half a kilometre of the ship was seen by someone. At the guides' wrap-up session after one full day at sea, we had recorded 34 seabird species – a shade less than 10 per cent of the world's

seabird species! A highlight came late in the evening when a fishing boat passed in front of us, heading for Lüderitz. Trailing in its wake was a mixed flock, including terns, shearwaters, petrels and albatrosses, affording excellent views of many birds that before then had only been seen distantly and giving many Flockers a sense of why a pelagic day-trip out of Cape Town is considered one of the greatest birding spectacles on the planet.

During the cruise there were courses in seabird identification and digital photography, and half a dozen lectures from invited local and international experts. The varied programme ensured that, alongside the regular entertainment provided by the MSC team, there was never a dull moment.

As the ship docked in Walvis Bay, the excitement became palpable. Between MSC and various tour operators in Namibia, there was a great diversity of birding and other tours on offer. Despite a disappointing disembarkation procedure, everyone who had booked a tour got to see and do what they had wanted. And the birding list for the day, from all quarters combined, was nothing short of sensational. For the birders who had mobile phones and vehicles, rapid communication ensured that

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many bagged some exciting rarities. Although these have not yet been verified through the rarities committee, highlights included Buff-breasted Sandpiper, Redshank, and American and Pacific golden plovers. Special birds for the Walvis Bay area were also seen on several of the birding tours, including Gray's and Dune larks and Damara Tern. Those who chose to amble around the productive Walvis lagoon were not disappointed, with flamingos, pelicans, masses of waders and huge flocks of terns giving everyone a taste of the amazing birding to be enjoyed.

The AGM was a chance to showcase the high points of another successful year for BirdLife South Africa, announce the 2014 Bird >



ROBBIE ASPELING



PETER RYAN



above Mark Anderson and David Chamberlain.

above, left Cory's Shearwater was possibly the most abundant pelagic seabird seen on the trip.

top The auditorium on board *MSC Opera* was packed with birders attending the AGM.



Birders entered into the spirit of the fun events held during the cruise.



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contributor of note and without a shadow of doubt one of the major highlights of Flock, was Peter Harrison. He is one of the world's top seabird guides, artists, philanthropists and authors. Peter exceeded all expectations, entertaining all who stood near him on deck with stories and facts about the birds encountered. His two lectures were among the best anyone had ever attended. Every man and woman to whom I spoke who had been at Peter's opening lecture on albatrosses was moved to tears by his extraordinary narrative. After his second lecture, on penguins, he gave a personal message in support of BirdLife South Africa, and in particular our Albatross Task Force and African Penguin programmes.

speakers, the question on everyone's lips was along the lines of what will BirdLife South Africa be putting together for the next Flock? Watch this space...

ROSS WANLESS



ROBBIE ASPELING

above BirdLife South Africa staff members were all hands on deck... from left to right: Tshikana Rasehlomi, Sam Ralston, Hanneline Smit-Robinson, Nikki McCartney, David Maphisa and Bronwyn Maree.

top Birders came out in force to enjoy the cruise and show their support for BirdLife South Africa.

left Peter Harrison, whose lectures kept audiences enthralled.

of the Year (fittingly, this will be the Tristan Albatross, currently the only globally Critically Endangered bird that occurs in South Africa), and to announce that through Flock 2013, the Albatross Task Force would receive a R200 000 donation.

Many people contributed hugely to the success of Flock and are too numerous to list exhaustively. That said, three people in particular deserve recognition. First are Adam Riley of Rockjumper Birding Tours, and our outgoing President, Prof. Peter Ryan. They provided guiding expertise (six Rockjumper guides were on board), photographic know-how and fantastic lectures, and as President, Peter Ryan continued the tradition of previous years with an address that was moving, humorous, informative, and inspirational. The third

The amazing duo of Nikki McCartney, BirdLife South Africa's Events Manager, and Gisela Ortner, one of our stalwart volunteers, ensured that everything that was within our power to manage went smoothly. Although a team of BirdLife staff and volunteers had helped plan and manage logistics, it was these two exceptional women who brought the trip together so professionally. By the end of the trip, apart from the thanks that everyone was giving to the BirdLife staff, guides and

IN THE red

Many of South Africa's bird species are classified as Endangered and are listed in the Red Data Book of Birds.

On 14 February 2013 Etana Insurance and BirdLife South Africa, in association with Charles Greig Jewellers and the Everard Read Gallery, hosted clients, friends and donors at an elegant 'In the Red' evening at Villa Arcadia in Johannesburg. The evening was held to celebrate Valentine's Day and, more importantly, to raise awareness about South Africa's Red Data birds.

Cocktails, appropriately red and kindly supplied by Campari, were served to welcome guests as they made their way down the red carpet to the elegant Villa.

Mark Anderson spoke about South Africa's Red Data birds and the pressing need to protect the wetland and grassland habitats which are vital to the survival of many species, and he concluded by stressing the need for ongoing support of BirdLife South Africa's important work.

Women were treated to stylish black goody bags, containing chocolates sponsored by Aon and Bobbi Brown mascaras. Beautiful bronze bird sculptures were on display, and 10 per cent of the proceeds from sales went to BirdLife South Africa. Frédérique Constant watches were also a feature of the evening, and the lucky draw for a lady's watch was won by Barbara Cory. Our thanks go to David and Jenny Moss from Picot & Moss for their generous donation of this prize.

NIKKI MCCARTNEY
EVENTS MANAGER



above The Campari barman displaying his impressive skills.

top Nikki McCartney and Tania Anderson were on hand to welcome the guests.



GAINING MOMENTUM

In November, BirdLife South Africa staff and supporters in Gauteng will be cycling the Momentum 94.7 Cycle Challenge to raise awareness and funding for our critical conservation work.

We invite you to join us by:

- Purchasing a BirdLife South Africa cycling shirt and riding in our charity group;
- Urging your social network to support your charity ride by donating to BirdLife South Africa through GivenGain;
- Getting your friends and family to join you in riding for the only dedicated bird conservation NGO in the country.

It is easy to join our charity ride. If you are chasing a best time you can still participate on our behalf by riding in our cycling shirt, and help us raise funds by inspiring your social network to support you and this worthy cause.

For more details, contact Daniel Marnewick on e-mail daniel.marnewick@birdlife.org.za, or tel. (011) 789 1122 or 082 772 4432.

above The voice of cycling, Phil Liggett, is BirdLife South Africa's cycling patron.

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ROBBIE ASPELING

Outgoing President of BirdLife South Africa Peter Ryan with Gill Memorial Award recipient Rob Crawford.

GILL MEMORIAL AWARD

Robert James Minchin Crawford

Dr Rob Crawford is a very deserving recipient of the Gill Memorial Award. Over the past 40 years he has made a major contribution to our understanding of seabird population dynamics, and in particular the importance of fisheries and other human impacts on their conservation. At a time when many government officials have given up in the face of an increasingly difficult working environment, Rob has stubbornly continued to not only produce excellent research, but also to fight tirelessly for the conservation of southern Africa's seabirds.

Rob was born in Kenya in 1948 and trained as a zoologist at the University of Natal, Pietermaritzburg. After obtaining his BSc Honours in 1970, Rob went to work for the then Sea Fisheries Research Institute in Cape Town in 1971. He remained there throughout the 1970s, obtaining his PhD from the University of Cape Town in 1979 on the pelagic fish stocks of the Western Cape. After a short stint as an ecologist with the National Parks Board, based at the Tsitsikamma National Park, he returned to Sea Fisheries in 1982. He has remained there ever since, through the numerous organisational reshuffles that saw it change to Marine and Coastal Management, and more recently, Oceans and Coasts within the Department of Environmental Affairs.

Throughout his long and distinguished career, Rob has published close on 300 papers and several books, including co-editing the influential *Oceans of Life off Southern Africa* with Andy Payne. His scientific contribution has grown each decade, despite increasing demands on his time for management activities.

Apart from his research on pelagic fish and the functioning of the Benguela ecosystem,

Rob's major contribution to seabirds and their conservation started with a series of papers with Peter Shelton, John Cooper and Richard Brooke summarising the breeding distributions and population sizes of southern Africa's seabirds. These papers already highlighted the importance of fisheries on seabird population dynamics, and provided an important baseline for much of Rob's subsequent work. Another focus of Rob's early research was the recognition of the importance of long-term data sets, and he worked assiduously to ensure the development of such data sets for southern Africa's seabirds, tracking both their populations and diet.

Rob's pioneering work gained extra emphasis with the passing of the Marine Living Resources Act in 1998. This required South Africa to adopt an ecosystems approach to fisheries management, and was influenced by the strong empirical evidence from seabirds showing the impact of single-species fisheries management on other elements in the ecosystem. In the 1990s, Rob also extended his research arena from the Benguela to the Southern Ocean, taking responsibility for

South Africa's contributions to the Commission on the Conservation of Antarctic Marine Living Resources under the Antarctic Treaty and initiating regular surveys of all seabirds breeding at the Prince Edward Islands. He used his position to ensure South Africa drafted a National Plan of Action to reduce seabird bycatch by long-line fisheries and was instrumental in getting South Africa to accede to the Agreement on the Conservation of Albatrosses and Petrels (ACAP) under the Bonn Convention. He has led South Africa's delegation to subsequent meetings of ACAP parties and advisory committee meetings.

In 1999, Rob was awarded the Gilchrist Medal for his contributions to marine research in southern Africa, and in 2004 he was appointed as an honorary Associate Professor at UCT. He retired from Oceans and Coasts in early 2013, but such is the esteem in which his contribution is held within this department that he has been offered a three-year contract extension. We can only hope that he accepts this contract and continues to help conserve South Africa's seabirds.

PETER RYAN AND ROSS WANLESS

OSTRICH

Ostrich is the scientific journal of BirdLife South Africa. It is the leading ornithological journal in Africa, and publishes peer-reviewed scientific papers on all aspects of ornithology conducted in Africa and its associated islands and marine habitats. Three issues are published annually.

The first issue of 2013 begins with an obituary for Professor Phil Hockey, Director of the Percy FitzPatrick Institute of African Ornithology. Among the research articles in this issue are the first robust estimates of population sizes of three vulture species in the Kruger National Park, incredibly the first of its kind for this well-studied ecosystem and a base upon which to

monitor changes in future. Other groundbreaking studies include long-term estimates of the survival rates of birds in West Africa; a description of the hovering behaviour of African sunbirds which reveals how closely sunbirds' co-evolutionary adaptations to a nectarivorous diet match those of hummingbirds; an important contribution about the effects of agriculture on bird species diversity in Kenya; and a description of hybridisation events between Eurasian Common and African Long-legged buzzards.

DR LIZANNE ROXBURGH, EDITOR-IN-CHIEF
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SASOL Bird. Fair

25 & 26 May 2013

The Sasol Bird Fair will be held at the Johannesburg Zoo, Gauteng, on 25 and 26 May 2013. This year's theme is Conserving our Wetlands. The Bird of the Year for 2013, the White-winged Flufftail, is a wetland specialist.

Both days of the fair are packed with lectures on topical subjects, as well as workshops, guided walks and activities for children. A wide variety of exhibitors will be displaying their wares on the Centenary Lawn and items such as binoculars, camera equipment, bird books and bird feeders will be for sale.

Learn more, for free

The Sasol Bird Fair is the ideal event at which to improve your knowledge of birds and learn more about some of the measures being taken to conserve South Africa's birdlife. On both days, free talks on a variety of topics concerning wetland and grassland bird species will be presented in a marquee on the Centenary Lawn, on a first-come, first-served basis.

You will, however, need to book for the workshops on bird photography and bird identification for beginners. These will be held in the Old Elephant House and the AngloGold Centre, and a small fee will be charged to attend.

Sasol's commitment to birds

Sasol aims to foster enthusiasm for the preservation of South Africa's birds and has committed itself to sponsoring a number of bird projects. These include the Sasol Bird Fair, the *Sasol Birds of Southern Africa* field guide, as well as bird hides and birding weekends.



WARWICK TARBOTON

PROGRAMME OF EVENTS

SATURDAY, 25 MAY 2013

- Photography workshop
- Bird identification course
- Critically Endangered: the White-winged Flufftail
- The wetland birds of Gauteng
- What about the waders?

SUNDAY, 26 MAY 2013

- Photography workshop
- Bird identification course
- Threats facing wetland bird species
- Conserving South Africa's wetlands and grasslands
- Wetland specialists of the Kruger National Park

This programme is subject to change.



BIRD OF THE YEAR 2013 White-winged Flufftail

In sharp contrast to species selected in previous years, this year the fair celebrates a bird that is rarely seen and is little known.

The White-winged Flufftail is small, weighing a mere 30–35 grams, with streaked brownish plumage, a rufous head, chest and tail, and broad white secondary wing feathers that are conspicuous in flight. Flufftails are related to crakes and rails, and all are small, secretive, ground-dwelling birds that typically reveal their presence only by their ghostly, hooting calls. Whereas the calls of other flufftail species are well known, there is much confusion about that of the White-winged Flufftail. This compounds the inherent problem of finding and learning more about this species, which has a highly fragmented distribution, a small population and specific habitat requirements. Only known to occur in high-altitude wetlands in South Africa and Ethiopia, the White-winged Flufftail is one of South Africa's five Critically Endangered bird species and is the focus of BirdLife South Africa's conservation attention.

For more information about the Sasol Bird Fair, contact Nikki McCartney on cell +27 (0)83 636 1060 or e-mail events@birdlife.org.za



FOCUS ON THE black harrier

MARK D. ANDERSON

Numbering less than 1 500 individuals, the Black Harrier *Circus maurus* is southern Africa's rarest endemic raptor. It has a small world distribution, occurring only in parts of South Africa, Lesotho and Namibia. During 2013 this globally Vulnerable raptor will be uplisted in South Africa from Near Threatened to Endangered.

A striking black-and-white bird, the harrier is found in fynbos, renosterveld, Karoo shrubland and dry grassland, where it feeds predominantly on mice and, to a lesser extent, small birds, reptiles, frogs and insects. The Black Harrier has suffered a considerable population decline in the Overberg regions of the Western Cape as a result of the fragmentation and loss of most of the natural renosterveld habitat.

In its core areas (the winter-rainfall regions of South Africa's west coast) it is confined largely to protected areas. Elsewhere it breeds periodically in the Eastern Cape and Northern Cape, and occasionally in KwaZulu-Natal, where it favours coastal areas or mountains. The Black Harrier's numbers are thought to vary in some areas in response to food availability, synchronising with fluctuating rodent populations. In

Lesotho, its migration coincides with the breeding of ice rat populations.

A pilot study is under way to determine the dispersal and behaviour of satellite-tagged Black Harriers, and regular updates on the travels of these birds can be viewed at www.blackharrierspace.blogspot.com. The study by Rob Simmons has shown that female Black Harriers head for the highest points in southern Africa (such as the Lesotho plateau) after breeding, whereas the males tend to stay closer to their breeding grounds. The urgency for studies on these raptors is intensifying because the west coast region of the Western Cape, parts of the Eastern Cape and areas in Lesotho have been earmarked for wind-farm developments, and inappropriately sited wind turbines could result in significant harrier mortalities at both ends of the migration route.



A satellite-tagged female Black Harrier is released by Rob Simmons.

The Black Harrier Research team is affiliated to the Percy FitzPatrick Institute of African Ornithology at the University of Cape Town and it is the BirdLife Species Guardian for the harrier under the Preventing Extinctions Programme.



Your contribution will help BirdLife South Africa in its endeavours to save the Black Harrier. For more information, contact Hanneline Smit-Robinson conservation@birdlife.org.za

DONATE & STAND A CHANCE TO WIN!



With a population of between 1 000 and 1 500 birds, the Black Harrier is southern Africa's rarest endemic raptor. It has a small world distribution, occurring only in parts of South Africa, Lesotho and Namibia. This globally Vulnerable bird of prey will be uplisted in South Africa from Near Threatened to Endangered during 2013.

FIRST PRIZE: A weekend (three nights, from 27–30 September 2013) for four people at Duinepos Chalets self-catering accommodation in the West Coast National Park. The weekend includes a day in the field with harrier specialist and researcher Dr Rob Simmons, and a full day's guided birding with Birding Africa. Transport costs are for the winner's account.

SECOND PRIZE: A copy of *Harriers of the World*, signed by the author, Rob Simmons.

BLACK HARRIER DONATION: R200

Question: Which endemic raptor will be nationally uplisted to Endangered in 2013?

Answer:

Title	First name	Surname
ID number		
Tel.		Cell.
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Direct Payment Details: First National Bank, Randburg, Acc. No. 62067506281, Branch Code 254005. Please remember to use both 'Harrier' and your personal name on the payment reference.

To qualify, donations of R200, with proof of payment, must reach us on e-mail harrier@birdlife.org.za or by fax 086 775 7668 by midnight on 31 July 2013. The draw will take place on 2 August 2013. Terms and conditions apply (see www.birdlife.org.za/conservation/threatened-species/black-harrier).

AVOIDING CLEAR & PRESENT DANGER

The transparency of glass, while the perfect medium through which to view birds from your home or office, can pose a considerable danger to the birds themselves, that of collision.

Make a donation to BirdLife South Africa of R60 (plus postage) and receive a pack of five decal transfers which can be adhered to your windows to reduce the risk of birds crashing into them. Donations are in support of research on and conservation of the Black Harrier.

To order, download the donation form from www.birdlife.org.za/conservation/threatened-species/black-harrier



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Duinepos Chalets

Duinepos Chalets are a retreat for bird- and nature-lovers. The charming chalets are situated within the West Coast National Park on the Cape West Coast, some 15 kilometres from Langebaan Lagoon and 17 kilometres from the centre of the town of Langebaan.

The camp offers 11 self-catering chalets, all of which can sleep four to six people. It is secluded and peaceful – the only sounds you will hear on waking are bird calls.

