



Wakkerstroom Project

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"BIRDER'S GUIDE"

TO THE BIRDS OF WAKKERSTROOM AND SURROUNDS

Compiled by Nigel & Sue Anderson April 2003

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INTRODUCTION

Wakkerstroom has long been known globally as an Important Birding Area (IBA) and is listed as such in the IBA Directory - IBA No. SA020. It is a birding haven with marvels to entice both the experienced birder and newcomers to this rewarding pastime.

A visit to the Wakkerstroom area will almost guarantee one the opportunity to see three highly endemic species which are restricted to South Africa's high altitude grasslands. There are 13 endemics or near endemics in South Africa and 9 of them can be seen in Wakkerstroom and surrounds.

A QUICK REMINDER ABOUT "BIRDING ETHICS"

Avitourism is a rapidly growing pastime in Southern Africa and in places like the United States, it is the second-most popular outdoor hobby - gardening being the first. For this reason, it is important that all partakers in this wonderful hobby respect the rights of others. Please ensure that you adhere to the basic rules of birding so as not to bring the birding fraternity into disrepute and in the interests of birding and bird conservation.

- If you are taking a self-drive bird route (without the services of a bird guide), remember that many of the areas you will visit will be privately owned farms. Please ensure that you get permission to access their property before hand.
- When birding from the roadside, make sure that you stop right on the side to ensure that safety and convenience of other road users.

SPECIAL BIRDS OF THE AREA

The endemics or near endemics that one can see in the area and their status according to the IBA directory, include :

Rudd's Lark ("critically endangered")
Botha's Lark ("internationally vulnerable")
Yellowbreasted Pipit ("internationally vulnerable")
Bald Ibis ("internationally vulnerable")
Blue Korhaan ("internationally near threatened")
Eastern Longbilled Lark
Sentinel Rockthrush
Buffstreaked Chat
Spotted Prinia
Bush Blackcap
Chorister Robin
and of course, Spike-heeled Lark and Whitebellied Korhaan.

Various habitats in the region include grassland, mist belt forests, gorges and cliffs, dams and an extensive wetland system. Weather conditions in the area are unpredictable. In the summer, it's normally mild with minimum temperatures of around 12°C and maximum temperatures of around 25°C. Harsh winters are the norm with minimum temperature frequently plummeting below zero and maximum temperatures usually in the mid to low teens. It is not uncommon to have frost and snow but rain is not commonplace in the winter months.

BIRDING ROUTES

➤ IN THE WETLAND

On the BirdLife South Africa's project site there are three hides which offer excellent birding. These include the Sasol Flufftail, Crane and Iain Drummond Hides.

Sasol Flufftail hide is accessed from the BirdLife SA project site offices.

This hide is situated to the east of the Centre and is an easy 500m walk from the reception. **Red-chested Flufftail** are often heard from this hide but rarely seen. In the evenings or early mornings it is a good spot to find roosting **Grey Crowned Cranes**.

Crane Hide is accessed from the BirdLife SA project site offices.

The hide can be reached by driving past the reception/office, turn off towards the campsite. Simply follow the signs. The hide is 700m from the office complex. **Grey Crowned Cranes** are often seen feeding at this hide where they are fed during the winter months. Other species that may be encountered are **Blue Korhaan, Levillant's Cisticola, Long-tailed Widowbirds, Southern Red Bishops, Egyptian & Spur-winged Goose, Grey Heron, Black Shouldered Kite** etc.

Iain Drummond Hide access = go back towards the main road to Volksrust (R543). Turn RIGHT towards Volksrust and travel 800 m and turn RIGHT onto the Old Station road. Look out for **Common Waxbill, Longtailed Widow, Redshouldered Widow, Redcollared Widow, Bokmakerie and Redthroated Wryneck**. Continue for 2.6 km and you will see the parking area on the RIGHT. Whilst walking down to the hide and look for **Wattled Plover, African Pipit, Orangethroated Longclaw** as well as raptors like **Eastern Redfooted Kestrel, Blackshouldered kite, and Marsh Harrier**. At the hide itself, look for **Redchested Flufftail, European & Cape Reed Warbler, Ethiopian Snipe, African Rail** and the occasional otter.

Wakkerstroom - Amersfoort Utaga Bridge & the Clive Beck Memorial Hide

The Clive Beck Memorial Hide was donated to the Wakkerstroom Natural Heritage Association by Kangra Holdings Ltd. It is located at the Utaga river bridge which is on the outskirts of Wakkerstroom on the Amersfoort Road. To reach the hide, one takes a walk along a lovely board walk through the wetland. Whilst journeying along the boardwalk, look out for **Blackcrowned Night Heron** and **Redchested Flufftail**. Then, whilst enjoying a quiet moment in the hide itself, look out for **Crowned Crane**, **Ethiopian Snipe**, **Purple Gallinule**, **Purple Heron**, **Yellowbilled Egret** and **African Rail**.

On the Utaga Bridge itself, look out for **South African Shellduck**, **Little Bittern**, **Baillon's Crake**, **African Marsh Harrier**, **African Spoonbill** and **Purple Heron** - to name a few.

➤ GRASSLANDS

An extraordinary amount of good birding can be done on the grasslands surrounding the Wakkerstroom area.

Zaaihoek Dam & Pump Station route

Take the Newcastle road (just after crossing the vlei, before entering Wakkerstroom).

- Continue along the dirt road for 2 km, looking for **Blue Korhaan** and **Crowned Cranes**.
- At 5 km, you will cross the bridge over the Thaka River. In summer, this spot is excellent for **South African Cliff Swallow** and many other species of swifts and in the early morning, look out for **Greywing Francolin** and **Redwing Francolin**. Continue with the dirt road watching the telephone lines and fences for **Cisticola's** and **Stonechat**. The cultivated areas are very good for various species of seedeaters, in particular, **Red Bishop**, **Quelia** and **Shouldered, Coloured and Longtailed Widows**. The dam is pretty unproductive due to the depth of the water, however, the edges do produce fair amounts of **Spur-winged** and **Egyptial Geese**.
- At the 12 km mark, watch out for **Eastern Redfooted Kestrel**, **Buffstreaked** and **Mountain Chats**, **Black Shouldered Kites**, and **Bald Ibis**.
- At the small cutting just before the bridge, look for **Buffstreaked Chat**, **Pied Starling** and **Ground Woodpecker**.
- Park on either side of the bridge and walk onto the bridge itself. Look for **Ground Woodpecker**, **Horus Swift**, **Cape Robin**, and **Malachite Sunbird**. The rocky area on the side of the road is a good spot to watch the basking rock hyrax. **Grassbirds** are fairly common in the grassy area adjacent to the river and **Mountain Reedbuck** can be seen on the steep grass slopes further down stream.
- At the 15km point where you get a good view of the dam wall and dam itself, look out into the open water and you will see an island with dead trees on it. This is an excellent spot very early in the morning or late afternoon where you could see hundreds of **egrets** as they come in to roost or leave the roost. Continue with this road watching the lines for **Banded Martin** and **Mountain Chat**.
- At 20.4 km turn LEFT to GROENVLEI and enjoy the spectacular scenery as one descends to the Manzimnyama River.
- At 27 km is the start of the *Leucosidia* veld. Watch the lines for **Ant-eating Chat** and scan the grasslands for **Secretary Bird**. Keep a watchful eye on the adjacent cliffs for **Jackal Buzzard**.
- At 37.6 km you will come to a "Y" junction. Turn LEFT towards Wakkerstroom. Enjoy the spectacle of a pristine example of a meandering oxbow river as it ambles through the grassland.
- At 49.3 km, you may see both **Redwing** and **Greywing Francolin**.
- At 50.1 km is a gravel road to the LEFT leading to an old quarry where **Ground Woodpecker** breed.
- At 53.7 your journey will end in Wakkerstroom.

Fickland Pan

Please note that there is an **ENTRANCE FEE** of R10.00 per vehicle of 4 people and R20.00 per vehicle of 5 or more people.

There are three routes to Fickland Pan.

Fickland Pan -Route 1 (25 km)

Take the Amersfoort Road and, measuring from the beginning of the dirt road, continue for 2.6 km when you will cross the first railway line. Look out for **Longtailed Widows, Pied Starlings, Steppe Buzzards** and **Jackal Buzzards**.

- Continue straight until you have done 5 km and cross the second railway line. Look out for **Cuckoo Finch**.
- At 6.2km you will turn LEFT onto the VOLKSRUST road. Look out for **Spikeheeled & Redcapped Larks**.
- At 14 km, look out for **Rudd's & Botha's Lark** on the right hand side of the road and also watch out for **Stanley's Bustard and Blue Korhaan**.
- At 18.2 km, turn RIGHT at the "T" junction towards WYDGELEGEN.
- At 19.8 km you will cross a drift - this is a good spot for **Half-collared Kingfishers**.
- At 20.8 km - rock wall on your right, look out for basking rock Hyrax (dassies).
- At 22.3 km continue STRAIGHT at the VLAKPOORT turn off.
- At 25.0 km, turn LEFT through the farm gate and follow the arrows to Fickland Pan. Please be sure to close the gate.

Fickland Pan -Route 2 (17.8 km)

Take the Amersfoort road and, measuring from the beginning of the dirt road, follow the same directions as for "Route 1" until you reach the first Volksrust turn off at 6.2 km.

- Continue STRAIGHT, looking out for **Bald Ibis** and **Golden Bishops**.
- At 10.9 km turn LEFT on the VOLKSRUST road. Look for **Stanley's Bustard, Pale Crowned Cisticola** and, closer to the "T" junction, **Yellowbreasted Pipit**.
- At 16.2 km, turn LEFT at the "T" junction towards VOLKSRUST.
- At 17.0 km cross the railway line.
- 80m past the railway line, turn RIGHT onto the farm and follow the arrows to the pan.

Fickland Pan -Route 3 (24.6 km)

Take the Amersfoort road, measuring from the beginning of the dirt road.

- Cross the railway line X 2.
- At 6.2 km, go STRAIGHT at the first VOLKSRUST turn off. Look for **Blue Cranes, Swifts and Swallows**.
- At 10.9 km, turn LEFT on to the VOLKSRUST road.
- At 18.5 km continue STRAIGHT at the VLAKPOORT sign. Good spot for **Anteating & Mountain Chat**.
- At 22.9 km, continue STRAIGHT at the WAKKERSTROOM turn off.
- At 23.8 km, cross over the railway line, continuing STRAIGHT.
- At 24.6 km, just past the 20 km road marker, turn RIGHT onto the farm and follow the arrows to the pan.

Amersfoort Road

- This is an excellent route to take if you have limited time to spend in Wakkerstroom. Leaving Wakkerstroom and heading towards Amersfoort, you will cross over the wetland and onto a gravel road. Continue until you have crossed over the railway line twice and then take the first turning LEFT. You will cross the railway line again immediately.
- Watch out for **Stanley's Bustard** and **Blue Korhaan, Banded Martin** (summer), **Bald Ibis** and **Blue Crane** whilst traversing this road. Other birds to look out for include **Lesser Kestrel, Western Redfooted Kestrel** and **Eastern Redfooted Kestrel** which are usually in abundance on the

telephone lines or circling in large flocks. After passing the farm school, look out for **Eastern Longbilled Lark** and then as you enter the rocky areas, you could see **Buffstreaked Chat**, **Sentinel Rockthrush**, **Ground Woodpecker**, **Mountain Chat** and **Rudd's Lark**, **Redcapped Lark**, **Spikeheeled Lark** and **Botha's Lark**. Keep a look out for **Palecrowned Cisticola** and **Ayres' Cisticola**.

- Continuing with your journey, you should turn left at the "T" junction and continue along the way, ignoring the Wakkerstroom signpost. **Ground Woodpecker**, **Buffstreaked Chat** and **Sentinel Rockthrush** are often seen as the road starts to drop (in the river bed on your right). When you reach the "T" junction, head back to Wakkerstroom but continue to keep your eyes tuned as there is excellent birding on this route.

Utrecht Road

- On a drive along this route you could expect to see a variety of birds such as **Buffstreaked Chat**, **Mountain Chat**, **Ground Woodpecker** and **Sentinel Rockthrush**. Turning right at the PAULPIETERSBURG turnoff, head up the hill and look out for a wire gate on your right. A walk in this field (town land so no need to worry about permission) could produce a sighting of the **Yellowbreasted Pipit**. Other specials on this route include **Cape Canary**, **Grassveld Pipit**, **Orangethroated Longclaw**, **Eastern Longbilled Lark** and **Redcapped Lark**.

➤ FOREST BIRDING

Forest birding in the area is limited, however, one can see a variety of forest birds such as **Orange Thrush**, **Crowned Eagle**, **African Goshawk**, **Bush Blackcap**, **Chorister Robin**, **Starred Robin**, **Olive Woodpecker**, **Yellow warbler** and **Olive Bush Shrike** in a few privately owned forests in the area. It is important to note that access to these areas must be pre-arranged.

Retirement Forest

- The forest is located about 30 km along the PIET RETIEF road. Access to this forest is only by using a Local Bird Guide (private property).

BIRD GUIDES

There are several trained bird guides in Wakkerstroom, all of whom completed their training at the BirdLife South Africa training center. It makes for a memorable day's birding to make use of the services of a guide. They will almost guarantee you sightings of the "specials" in the area and take great pride in their profession. A maximum of eight people per group is stipulated to ensure that guests enjoy the ultimate experience. Guests are required to book a guide in advance (see contact details below). Guides are collected from a pre-arranged point at a pre-arranged time, and they travel with the client in their vehicle.

Contact details :

- BirdLife South Africa Guides / Lucky Ndube (017) 7300433
- Norman Mncube 082 584 1542
- Sifiso Magagula 072 278 2822
- John McAllister (Tour Operator) (017) 7300269