



## NOVEMBER 2021 NEWSLETTER



Early morning at Glenhaven, 21 November. Picture by **Trevor Johnson**.

### Introduction from the Editor

There's a definite theme this time round: cliffs and crags and the lizards that frequent them—with a heavy dash of bird power, just to keep things feathery.

But first on page 3, we take a look at the mountain bikers of almost-but-not-quite Lesotho, who pedal for the heavens every chance they get—and it sounds incredible. On page 6 we learn who takes over when the wild mice slack on their pollination duties (the answer may surprise you). Gerald Camp leads us into the woods on page 8, and on page 9 Trent Burnett tells us what cheeps good in St Lucia.

All this and a tiny bit more awaits you in these pages.

Let's head in.

~ Karen Runge

### UPCOMING MEETS:

#### DECEMBER

Sunday 19<sup>th</sup> - Monday 20<sup>th</sup>

Garden Castle Hike

*Traverse from Wilson Pass to Mzimude Cave, return via Mzimude pass*

Michaela Geytenbeek



#### JANUARY

Saturday 15<sup>th</sup>

Eric Penman Memorial:

Shongweni Climbing

*Shongweni*

Bruce Sobey

*(Kindly refer to the latest Meet Sheet for more information on all upcoming meets and club events.)*

## From Under the President's Desk

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Dear Members,

The highlight this month was without a doubt the end-of-year party and our annual underachiever awards, held this time at Glenhaven from Friday the 19<sup>th</sup> to Sunday the 21<sup>st</sup>. While thirty-six people attended, sadly not all of them walked away with the most coveted prize in the KZN section. Those who failed to adequately underachieve had to content themselves with relaxing by the river and engaging in the various activities on offer. A big thank you to Karen Miller and Neil Williamson for organising the weekend!



As we all know, both Neil and Karen have resigned from organising the Durban socials—so here's a quick reminder that if anyone is keen to take on this role, please contact the secretary.

We recently welcomed Fred Deyzel and Pierre Jordaan to the fold, but due to a few resignations our membership is now at 304. Well done to Colin McCoy, who capitalised on his 1 in 9 odds in the readership survey, and won himself a weekend at Cambalala. Winning has never been easier!

In access news, we have renewed our four season tickets at Umngeni Valley. For those who are not aware, this means that the first four members to enter the reserve on any day do not pay for entry. The valley offers excellent rock climbing and day hiking, with many spots along the river for swimming.

A Halloween high-angle rescue busted us into November, carried out near Mariannhill. The operation was managed in conjunction with SAPS EMS and Durban Metro, rescuing a man and his dog off a ledge.

In some exciting expedition news, John Black has applied for assistance in his bid to become the first South African party to summit K2. We're hoping he will talk regularly with our newsletter editor, so further details should follow in subsequent newsletters.

Well, by the time you read this the kids will be on holiday and the Christmas lights shining, so I'd like to wish all members a happy, peaceful and safe Christmas. And remember, if you head out into the mountains these holidays, make sure to take a compass. It's always awkward when you have to start eating your friends.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Carl".

Carl Dreyer

**President**

**KZN Section, MCSA**

# The ~~Not~~-Lesotho Thin Air Challenge

The 22<sup>nd</sup> Edition Rides Again



*Thin Air vista: The views are so killer that we had to take a break, turn our backs to the mountains, and drink some tea.*

***“It’s always exciting to look down at an eagle.”***

I had to agree with my brother—even though what we were looking at was not an eagle, but a vulture with a beard. I would have agreed with whatever he said then anyway, because the vulture we were looking at was a magnificent wild monarch—not the sort you see every day—and because this view we were enjoying went over a thousand metres down.

The indescribably beautiful Drakensberg mountain range forms a strategic watershed with its neighbour, Lesotho, where the abundant footpaths carved over decades by people and livestock have formed unforgettably fantastic natural trails and single tracks.

The

The inaugural Lesotho Thin Air Mountain Bike Challenge was held in 1998. This was done on hard trails, before dual suspension, with limited concern for helmets and without much in the way of high tech. Since then, the event has grown to an annual gathering of non-competitive, technical-riding-obsessed mountain bikers, who camp alongside mountain streams in a self-sufficient, low-impact manner through agreement with local chiefs.

The Thin Air Challenge is not a race. It is four days of unforgettably fine high-altitude mountain biking, winding through breath-taking mountain scenery with a bunch of like-minded people who ride down rutted slopes at scary speeds, swim in frozen streams, tell long yarns in the evening, and are honestly thankful to be African. The organisers (locals from Matatiele) spend their spare time playing in Lesotho, searching for ever-more remote and obscure paths. It’s not uncommon for cyclists in the event to be the first wheeled travellers on the goat paths and sled tracks that make up the route.

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***“It’s not uncommon for cyclists in the event to be the first wheeled travellers on the goat paths and sled tracks that make up the route.”***

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An essential component of the event is a back-up driver (wife, pal, sibling... anyone, as long as they are willing camp slaves), and preferably one with a dog for company and moral support on dodgy sections. The duties of dog and driver are to take the car and associated camp *impahla* by road from one stunning wild grassland campsite to the next, while the cyclists play in the high mountains. The difficulty of this task is often increased not by the condition of the road (which is ever-changing as progress marches inexorably onwards), but by the number of shebeens *en route*.

Due to a double-postponement of the 2020 Thin Air event (thanks to a tiny virus and its gargantuan global impact), access to Lesotho became too challenging to drag a gaggle of mountain bikers (and their associated vehicles, bike racks and dogs) over the limited border access. The organisers consulted with local chiefs in the Matatiele area, and sacrificed their weekends exploring trails and campsites in their backyard mountains. This resulted in a magical local event, held in



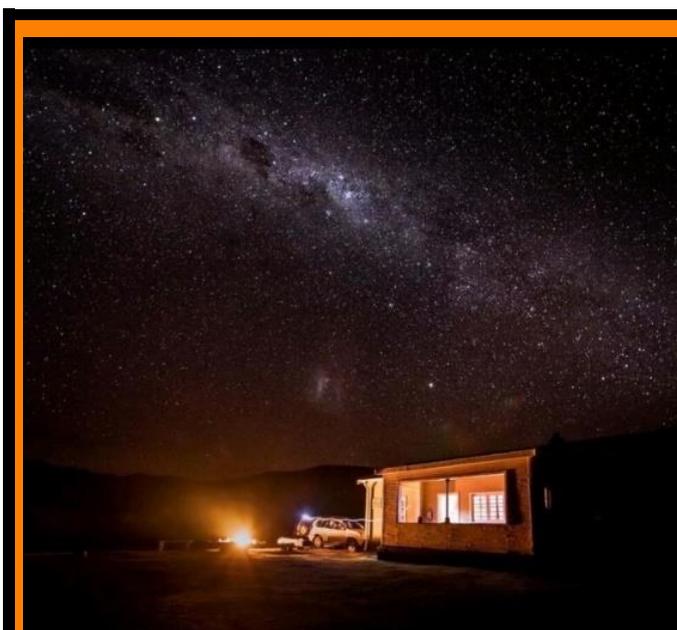
*Angus McLeod styling down Mpharane ridge, having left the old ballies in his dust.*

September 2021 and coinciding with Heritage Day. Braaing was mandatory every night, and kilts were suggested for Scottish riders (though compliance was low in that area). The crystal-clear Seeta stream provided the water, and its lower reaches were perfect for fresh bathing.

You need to experience that which is truly full of wonder to be reminded that 'wonderful' is not an advertising cliché. Travelling to the southern mountains of the Drakensberg Lesotho in the former Transkei is just that: *truly wonderful*.

We commend the efforts of the MCSA to protect and conserve these biodiverse and spectacular African Alps over the last century. Watch this space for the next instalment on efforts by Matatiele's locals to protect their precious mountains and rich cultural landscape. ▲

*Compiled by Nicky McLeod, with thanks to her husband, Mark, and apologies to fellow rider Advocate Glen Goddard for some stolen concepts.*



## STAY AT CAMBALALA COTTAGE

### Cottage:

R100 per night (required as deposit)

### Additional fees:

**Club members:** R70/night

**Non-Club members:** R120/night

*Children over the age of 14 are considered adults. Deposit to be paid at time of reservation. Charges include gas.*

Contact Clem: 084 500 4666  
clemnolarobins@gmail.com

# WANTED: HAVE YOU SEEN THIS PLANT ?



*Guthriea capensis* a.k.a. "Hidden flower"

## WHAT IS IT?

- A plant that is pollinated by lizards! (and maybe mice?)
- Small, cryptic: 10cm high, up to 30 cm diameter, green
- Found high in the SA mountains: Drakensberg, Sneeuberg, usually 1800 – 3000masl
- Flowers between December and April
- Leaves grow in spring & summer; may be absent in winter.
- Likes rocky areas, dolerite, basalt

## WHERE IS IT? Likely locations:

1. Kamberg: cliffs opposite camp?
2. Organ pipes/ Roland's cave
3. Sehlabathebe: dark loam in road cutting
4. Gateshead/ Naude's Nek
5. More Karoo sites??
6. Anywhere you see *Guthriea* plants in the 'berg...

## HOW CAN YOU HELP?

If you see plants, please contact the research team with

- GPS co-ords
- Estimated number of plants
- Can we camp nearby?
- Leave cameras safely?
- Did you see any lizards or signs of mouse activity?

CONTACT Ruth [ruthcozien@gmail.com](mailto:ruthcozien@gmail.com) 076 304 6769

And please share this poster with any other mountain lovers who might be able to help us!

## MORE INFO

UKZN Pollination Lab website QR code → <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2020/nov/25/is-it-a-bird-is-it-a-bee-no-its-a-lizard-pollinating-south-africas-hidden-flower-aoe>



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KWAZULU-NATAL  
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YAKWAZULU-NATALI

# HUNTING HIDDEN FLOWERS

By Ruth Cozien and Timo van der Niet



Crag lizard feeding on *Guthriea* flowers.

The Drakensberg's *Guthriea capensis*, known as "Hidden Flowers" for their habit of tucking their flowers away beneath their leaves, is the only species on the African continent so far found to depend on reptiles for pollination. Drakensberg Crag lizards (*Pseudocordylus subviridis*) feed on the nectar, picking up pollen with their snouts and transferring it as they move from plant to plant. The nectar is very bitter to the human taste, but its pungent scent likely helps the lizards sniff out the flowers concealed beneath the leaves.

The discovery that *Guthriea capensis* is pollinated by lizards was made in December 2017 on the slopes below the Sentinel, by a research team from the University of KwaZulu-Natal and Afromontane Research Unit at Free State University. Since most of this flower type's traits are typical of rodent-pollinated species (green flowers, bowl-shaped, full of nectar, and scented for nocturnal animals to find

them in the dark), it was a huge surprise when the motion-triggered cameras instead showed crag lizards visiting these flowers. When mice did occasionally saunter into frame, they ignored the plants entirely. To confirm this discovery, catching and releasing resident mice close to the plants established that the mice did not carry pollen, whereas the lizards caught in the study site did. When lizards were prevented (using wire mesh cages) from accessing the flowers, the number of fruits and seeds the plants developed dropped by 95%. Cameras since deployed over three flowering seasons at Sentinel have consistently recorded the same lizard species visiting the Hidden Flowers to feed.

Pollination by lizards and geckos is an unusual system, but not completely unknown. In island ecosystems where more of these cases have been recorded, fewer predators coupled with the relative scarcity of insects (reptiles'



Motion trigger camera trap focused on Guthriea plant

preferred fare) allows lizards to expand their diets to include fruits, flowers and nectar. Plants may in turn exploit unusual pollinators in these environments, as the usual suspects (bees and other insects) are less abundant. High mountains (such as the escarpment where *Guthriea* is usually found) might resemble islands in this way. Unpredictable weather may deter insects, leading to novel visitors such as lizards taking the role as pollinators.

The next step is to figure out just how unique pollination by lizards really is in South Africa. Is there a lack of known cases because the interaction is rare, difficult to observe, or both? Hidden Flowers are found all the way along the high berg from Sentinel to Naudes Nek and further, and as far as the Sneeuwberg in the

Graaff Reinet area of the Eastern Cape. Since the crag lizard species spotted at Sentinel only live in some of these areas, we suspect that similar species may be involved in pollination there, or that pollination by mice might perhaps be true elsewhere.

It's quite possible that the only human to have seen this lizard-flower interaction *in situ* is a Basotho herdsman, sitting on a rock and quietly taking in his surroundings. Anyone with the time to sit and observe plants while out hiking might see something no-one else has ever witnessed before. Mountain Club input has already added several new localities known for *Guthriea*, and provided potential study sites for the next research phase—but there are definitely more out there. We are looking for additional populations where we might sample flower scent and nectar, and also observe pollinators.

The plants at Sentinel are easy to find, so next time you're out there in December or January, look out for the dwarf spinach leaves along the trail. Lift the leaves, sniff a few flowers and (if you're brave!) taste the nectar. Take a moment to appreciate the unique ecology of these flowers—and should you see a crag lizard scuttling through the rocks, give him a quick salute.

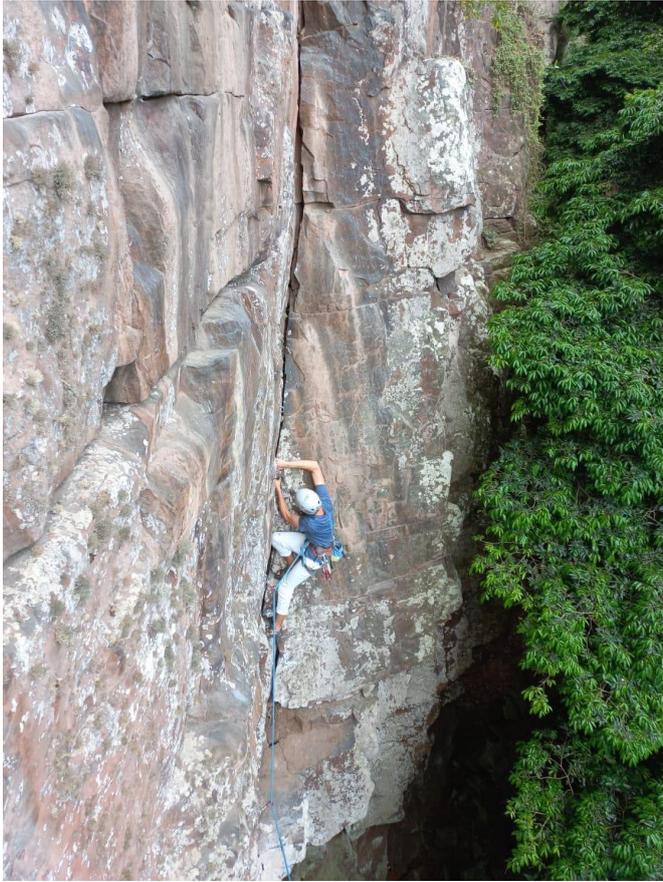
Please check our Wanted poster and use the details provided to help us find out more about this fascinating pollination interaction. ▲

**To read more on this discovery in The Guardian, and to see footage of a crag lizard pollinating (well, to his mind—eating!), grab this link:**

<https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2020/nov/25/is-it-a-bird-is-it-a-bee-no-its-a-lizard-pollinating-south-africas-hidden-flower-aoe>

## Resurrecting Delville Wood Crag

By Gerald Camp



Rory Camp on Last Brigade. Photo by Warwick Hastie.

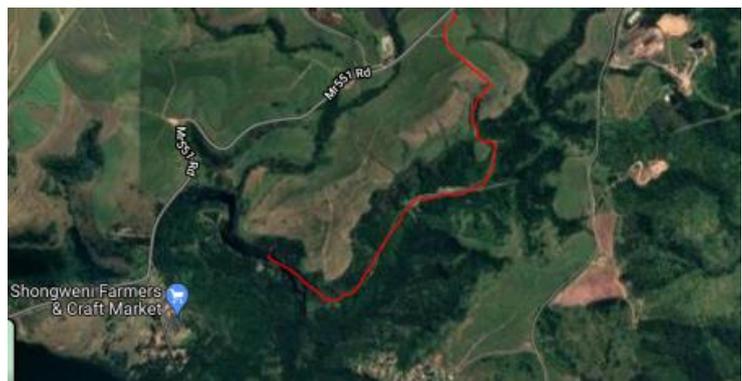
**Delville Wood** was first developed as a climbing crag in the early '90s, but fell by the wayside with the discovery of the Wave Cave, and following new developments in other parts of Shongweni Valley and Krantzklouf. But now, led by the ever-energetic Roger Natrass, Delville Wood is blasting back from the past. Natrass has pioneered a new, easy approach, decking the way down with glue-in rings to make the climbing area easily and safely accessible to all. Natrass is further leading the charge in rebolting some of the old routes, this time with stainless steel bolts. The parking area at the base of the scramble has also been cleared.

The road access (in the past often considered dodgy) is now a well-used road. For the gapers among us (that is, people who go to cliffs but who do not climb them), the tremendous 100m waterfall at the end of the road is a key attraction, with its staggering view over the gorge. One can be ripped off and pay R150 to head from the Farmers' Market to the waterfall

in a 4x4, or take a taxi down for a nominal fee. (This latter option comes with a traditional healer as part of the package, should you seek to communicate with your ancestors. Bring your own chicken.) Seriously though, any vehicle can get down there—so don't be deterred.

The guidebook lists all existing routes except for a few new ones. *First Brigade* (Grade 17) is a must. This long route follows sweet laybacks and offers good rest spots, and has been bolted for the timid climber. Other new additions include *Under Fire* (Grade 19), *Bazentine Ridge* (Grade 21), and *The Great Worm Race* (Grade 14)—a superb line with 3D climbing, which now sports shiny, new, MCSA-sponsored bolts. Other, easier routes still need a makeover, but there's plenty of potential here for routes all the way through Grades 12-20.

A big bonus for Delville Wood is that it's a good summer crag. The routes remain dry and shady all day, regardless of the weather. On a drizzly day, or a stonkingly hot day, this is the place to go—and with new security present in the area, steady traffic moving nearby, and the uptick in visitors to the waterfall, the crag is set to return as a sturdy favourite for climbers and cliff-lovers alike. ▲



# Not just for the birds: Birdwatching in St Lucia

By Trent Burnett

“ On a free weekend this month, I was invited to go birding in St Lucia. It sounded interesting, as this wasn’t something I’d ever done before—at least, not with any intent. Being a nature lover and outdoor enthusiast, an impromptu trip with my better half and a few of her friends sounded like a great way to start the weekend.

We headed north after lunch on Friday, Sugarloaf Campsite-bound, with the hope of glimpsing a few elusive fowls the following morning: namely, the Buff-Spotted Flufftail, the Green Malkoha, Rudd’s Apalis, the Purple-Banded Sunbird, Livingstone’s Turaco, and the Narina Trogon, to name a few on our list.

With camp set up and beers in-hand, we headed down to the beach via the boardwalk for a sundowner. After tanning a few chops, we popped out in search of the hippos that enjoy taking their evening strolls through the streets. Not far from our base, we were graced with a grazing giant who seemed to pirouette across the road several times before disappearing somewhat mystically into the thicket. Upon our return to camp, we spotted a bush baby enjoying the fruits of the fig tree above us, its cry capturing the mood as we cleaned up the aftermath of what seemed to have been a monkey Matric Rage Party.

The next morning, after a quick early morning coffee and a mosquito-repellent shower, we met up with our guide, Ian, from St Lucia Birding Tours. He led us through his forest, pointing out the wonders that dwell beneath its canopy—everything from our feathered friends at the fig tree to the whimsical weavers in the reeds. Ian’s knowledge of the area and of each species within the territory was truly remarkable. He picked up any call carried on the wind, flooding us with facts about plumage, diet or migration patterns.



In the undergrowth, hoping for a Flufftail.

One of the first calls we heard was that of the Green-Backed Camaroptera. It makes a sound akin to a camera lens shutter, or “camera

operator” as I like to think of it. We walked on past a Purple-Banded Sunbird (tick that one off the list), a Dark-Capped Bulbul, and a Trumpeter Hornbull, all *en route* to see a Rudd’s Apalis (another tick). Further along the trail we were pleased to spot a Red-Capped Robin, a Yellow-Rumped Tinkerbird, and a Black-Backed Puffback. (You can’t make this up!)

Shortly thereafter, we made our way to an area in the undergrowth where Ian was certain we’d spot our prize find: The Buff-Spotted Flufftail. We had been forewarned to dress in appropriate clothing, and to keep any movement down to a minimum as we sat on the forest floor in anticipation. Ian set up a speaker in an attempt to draw the bird out—not, as I assumed, with a call from a female, but rather a call from “another male”. As bashful and timid as these birds may seem, they will defend their territory against trespassing males without hesitation—hence the use of a male call as a lure. Not long after, our boy arrived in a fashion I can only describe as “valiant”, though with a somewhat cowardly stride. Almost like he’d been told by his mother to defend the family, but wanted to see what his opponent looked like before making any impetuous decisions. With his tiny little feet scuffling though the leaves, he circled us twice before hightailing to safer ground. (Buff-Spotted Flufftail: tick.)

Chuffed, we made for a more open space, spotting the beautiful yet elusive Narina Trogon (tick), a Golden-Tailed Woodpecker, a Black-Throated Wattle-Eye and a Southern Banded Snake Eagle. Heading out, we were fortunate to check yet a few more off the wish list: the Green Malkoha and its friends the Brown-Hooded Kingfisher and the Southern Yellow White Eye.

We said our goodbyes to Ian, and thanked him for so enthusiastically sharing his passion and wealth of knowledge with the six of us.” ▲

**St Lucia Birding Tours**

Ian has 37 reviews to date on TripAdvisor, all of which are five-star—and for good reason. To book a tour (and nab your Flufftail!), catch him on the details below.

**Web:**  
<https://stluciabirdingtours.weebly.com>

**Email:**  
[stluciabirdingtours@gmail.com](mailto:stluciabirdingtours@gmail.com)

**Cell:** 076 840 5611

# July Camp Needs YOU

The July Camp Sub-Committee needs new members to help prepare and run the KZN Section's annual July Camps of the future. We are looking for new recruits to share fresh ideas and contribute to making this unique event not only more memorable, but also more appealing to the tastes and interests of all Club members.

This special camp has been running for over 100 years. For the event, a base camp is set up in the mountains, with all cooking and catering taken care of—offering attendees 10 carefree days to enjoy the mountains however they like, exploring their surroundings or simply communing in the joy of wild spaces. Be it nature walks, hikes, birdwatching or bouldering, this no-limits event offers something for everyone, and anyone is welcome. Serving on the committee means sharing in an experience that is quite unlike anything else in the Section, or the MCSA—and it's fun!

New sub-committee members will need to attend 5-8 meetings before the next July Camp, with one of these taking place on-site to finalise details with the farmer/landowner or KZN Wildlife officials concerned. In addition to helping in the preparation and planning of the camp, new members will also join the advance party, where you will be on site for three days before the event starts. The advance party is responsible for loading/transporting/unloading equipment and food, establishing base camp, and organising the food tents. You will also need to be available on the first and last weekends of the 10-day July Camp, and the following Monday for dismantling and packing up, and to help return everything to Howick for storage.

Please contact me if you are interested in becoming a vibrant new part of July Camp—we are passionate about this event, and we welcome you!

WhatsApp: 082 538 5389

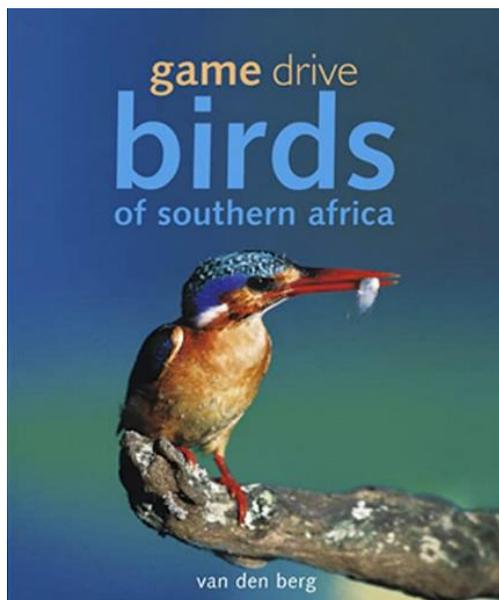
Phone: 033 239 2374

Rikki Abbott Wedderburn



# A little birdie tells me...

A bird guide review, by guest contributor Terry Louise Atkinson



## Game Drive Birds of Southern Africa

By *Philip van den Berg*

If you're a photographer and have a relatively limited knowledge of birds, this book is great. The pictures are of high quality, clear and large, providing a better view and detail of each bird. The author has done an excellent job of categorising the birds—for example, birds of prey, birds of the water, birds dependent on trees, etc. My favourite feature of the book is its useful 'Quick Find Guide'. As a beginner photographer, I am in awe of the book's excellent photos.

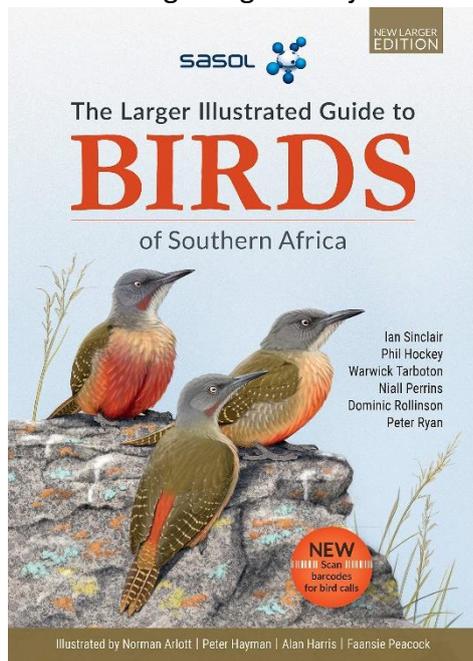
Compared to the well-known Roberts bird book series and the new Sasol Illustrated Guide, however, this book is more limited in variety and specie options and provides

less detail. This large hardcover is relatively heavy, and more of a coffee table edition (i.e., is not a convenient option to carry in your pack when out in the field).

## The Sasol Larger Illustrated Guide to Birds of Southern Africa

By *various contributors*

This guide provides considerable detail, including maps of the habitat and locations of each bird. The biggest drawback for a beginner would be the new scan barcode which provides the calls of the individual birds. Recognising a bird just from its call is amazing!



The guide is softcover and lightweight, and is therefore easier to carry on hikes.

As with all bird books I have personally consulted, I struggle to differentiate between juveniles and adult birds. (This is something I hope will someday be included in a bird book somewhere—it would be a fantastic feature.)

## Final Thoughts

A good guidebook is essential for any budding 'twitcher'—when one first starts recognising different species (whether by sight or by sound), the sense of accomplishment is very inspiring! Any guidebook that encourages you further on your birding journey is worth having in-hand... or at least (if it's not too heavy) definitely in the bush! ▲



*My sincerest thanks to everybody who sent me words or images for inclusion in this issue.*

*The newsletter serves to chronicle our experiences in the mountains we enjoy, and each contribution enriches that record. Please help me keep this newsletter alive by continuing to share the things you do, the things you know, and all the outdoor things we love.*

*Until next month, safe adventures everyone!*



*Karen Miller*

Hey Mountain Club Members  
 Have a suggestion or idea for inclusion in the next issue?  
 Is there anything you want to correct, or maybe there's something you'd like to see changed?  
 Why not drop the editor a message?  
*(Just be nice about it!)*  
 WhatsApp: 071 282 8304  
[rungekaren@gmail.com](mailto:rungekaren@gmail.com)

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<b>Durban Adventure Talks</b>	<i>Would you like to see your name here?</i>	<i>Our events need your support. Get in touch, get involved, and let's make it happen.</i>
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<p><b>Mountain Rescue KwaZulu-Natal</b> Toll Free: 0800 005 133</p>		