

GRAAFF-REINET BIRD CLUB

NEWSLETTER



AUTUMN 2012

FOR MEMBERSHIP AND GENERAL ENQUIRIES PLEASE CONTACT JUDY CARYER AT 049-8910353

AVITOURISM : A NICHE TOURISM MARKET AND A GROWING INDUSTRY

✎ Definition of Avitourism : *To travel outside of one's usual environment, to view birds in their natural habitat.*

✎ Definition of Usual Environment : *An area within a 40km radius of home.*

In March this year, the sighting of a Little Crake drew in excess of 600 local twitchers to the suburb of Clovelly (close to Fish Hoek, Cape Town). She spent 12 days in the wetland area, before departing as quietly as she had arrived. According to Trevor Hardaker, this twitch generated at least R400,000 for the local economy, and approximately R3-million worth of equipment was set up for viewing and photographing this bird during her stay.

In March next year, BirdLife SA will be holding its 2013 Flock at Sea AGM on the MSC Opera during a 5-day cruise from Cape Town to Walvis Bay. To date, over 800 birders have already booked their cabins. At an average rate of R5,000 per person sharing (which includes 4 nights' accommodation and entertainment, all meals per day, port & baggage charges, insurance and seabird programme), we are talking about a minimum of R4-million changing hands in support of this exciting birding event. This EXCLUDES road travel or flights to and from Cape Town, extra activities, events and miscellaneous purchases; not to mention the collective value of all the equipment that will be taken on board for the event. BirdLife SA hopes to have at least 1,000 birders participating and many will have non-birding partners or family members accompanying them. This will boost the initial R4-million economic injection substantially. For one event.

Now we are only talking about domestic avitourists in the above context, of which the really serious ones, according to a 2009 DTI survey, will each spend up to R48,000 per annum on their hobby. What sort of revenue is being generated by international avitourists in pursuit of their bird-watching passion in SA? Well, first of all they tend to spend more than local birders (up to R51,000 each per annum), and make up approximately 40% of all avitourists supporting our economy each year. Figures emanating from the DTI survey suggest that between 21,000 and 40,000 avitourists (domestic & international) travelled in South Africa during 2009 and collectively spent between R800-million and R1.5-billion on birding trips, support services and equipment.

In terms of its contribution to our GDP, avitourism is worth as much as R2-billion per year (conservative estimate). Because South Africa has such a rich diversity of habitat and birdlife, it is becoming an increasingly more popular destination for foreign avitourists.

Enough reason why the Government should contribute more towards ecotourism and participate more meaningfully in environmental protection and wildlife conservation.

[Sources : Africa Birds & Birding April/May 2012 & June/July 2012; DTI's 2010 report on Avitourism in South Africa.]

THE BIRD CLUB'S 11th ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

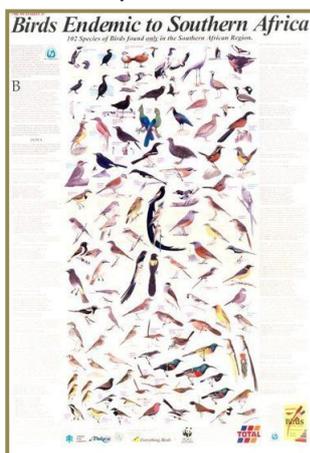
On Wednesday evening, 2nd May 2012, the Club's AGM was held in the Trinity Methodist Church Hall, Caledon Street, Graaff-Reinet. Jerry Rose-Innes ensured the smooth running of the meeting, and was re-elected as Chairman. Other members were duly proposed and seconded and the Committee is now constituted as follows :

- | | |
|------------------------|--|
| 1. Chairman | Jerry Rose-Innes |
| 2. Vice-Chairman | William Luckhoff |
| 3. Secretary/Treasurer | Judy Caryer |
| 4. Additional Member | Leonie Fouché (Newsletter & Publicity) |
| 5. Additional Member | Anna-Maree Vorster (back-up Secretary/Treasurer) |
| 6. Additional Member | Pierre Strydom |

Congratulations to the new Committee! Reportback was given on matters arising from the previous AGM and Judy informed the meeting about the change that had to be made to the Club's savings account. The decision was taken not to increase the annual subscription fee, and members in arrears were requested to pay their subs without further delay, in order to avoid being removed from the membership list.

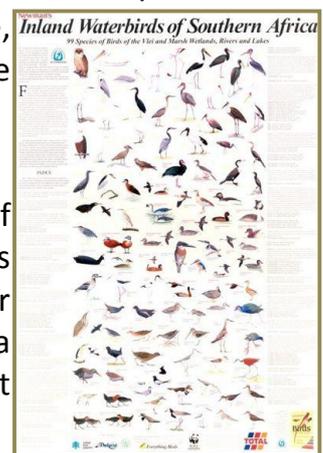
Bradley Gibbons from the Environmental Wildlife Trust in Cradock was the guest speaker, and gave a very interesting presentation on Blue Cranes. Some other members of the Crane family were also introduced and unusual aspects about these birds were explained.

Peter Burdett, Manager of the Camdeboo National Park, was presented with two lovely framed posters of Southern African Endemic Birds and Waterbirds, donated by the Graaff-



Reinet Bird Club for the Khwalimanzi Hide, situated close to the new campsite next to the Nqweba Dam.

Our thanks to Judy Caryer for taking care of the arrangements and securing the venue, as well as to other members for their contribution towards making the AGM a success. Thank you also to the Methodist Church for availing the venue and its facilities.



ROODEWAL OUTING

SATURDAY 4TH FEBRUARY 2012

Unfortunately this outing had to be cancelled as a result of really bad weather.

GANORA OUTING

SATURDAY 3RD MARCH 2012

This outing was well attended and a lovely morning was spent on the beautiful farm of JP and Hester Steynberg, just outside Nieu-Bethesda. The group was split in two, and each chose a different route to walk. With the different habitat (veld, lands, river and bush), a good variety of bird species were spotted ~ 43 in total, including :

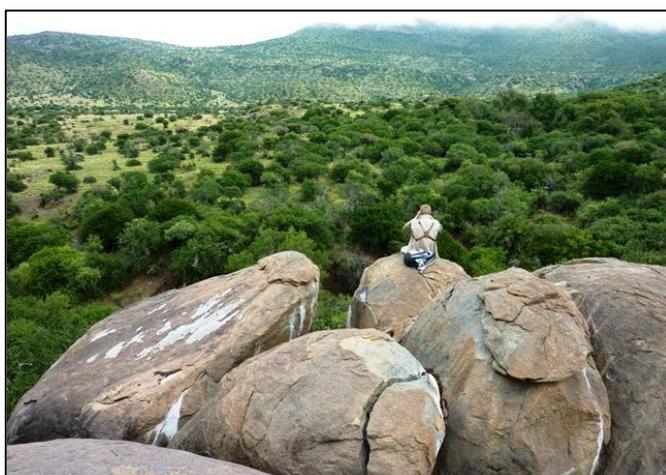
- 🐦 Namaqua & Willow Warblers, Greater Striped & Barn Swallows, Alpine Swift,
- 🐦 Fairy Flycatchers, Lark-like and Cinnamon-breasted Buntings, African Stonechat,
- 🐦 Malachite & Brown-hooded Kingfishers, Yellow-billed Duck, Three-banded Plover,
- 🐦 Verreaux's Eagle, Southern Pale Chanting Goshawk, Rock Kestrel, White-necked Raven.

CAMDEBOO NATIONAL PARK BIRDING WEEKEND

23RD – 25TH MARCH 2012

The wet weather did not deter birders from attending this well-organised event. Some of our Club's members participated, as well as people from further afield, such as Port Elizabeth, Grahamstown, East London and Gauteng. Guest Speaker Rion Lerm (of BirdLife Northern Gauteng) gave a very interesting presentation on bird conservation and monitoring and encouraged birders to participate in the SABAP2 bird atlas project.

Thick mist and a light drizzle for part of Saturday presented a bit of a challenge, however, two of the three groups still managed to submit their results by the end of the day. 72 Bird species were recorded around the Nqweba Dam and 47 species in the vicinity of the Environmental Education Centre, where sightings included :



- 🐦 Village Indigo Bird (rare in these parts), all 4 Bunting species found in the Park (Cape, Lark-like, Cinnamon- and Golden-breasted), White-browed Scrub-Robin (clear & close views!),
- 🐦 Long-billed Crombec, Cape & Pirit Batis, Red-billed & African Firefinches, Chestnut-vented & Layards Tit-Babblers, Black-headed Oriole.

Rion Lerm looking down on the spot where the Village Indigo Bird was heard and later seen.

BORDEN OUTING

SATURDAY 14TH APRIL 2012

The morning spent on the lovely farm of Lloyd and Janine Short included a walk down to the river, then into the veld and a visit to the dam. Some of the 42 species recorded were:

- 🦅 Pririt Batis, Yellow-bellied Eremomela, Long-billed Pipit,
- 🦅 Namaqua & Lesser Swamp Warblers, Green Wood-Hoopoe,
- 🦅 White-breasted & Reed Cormorant, South African Shellduck, Red-billed Teal.

GROOTDRIEFONTEIN OUTING

SATURDAY 5TH MAY 2012

This was one of the best outings the Club had in a long time ~ thanks to Katryn van Heerden. Percy and Sarie Reynolds received us with open arms, freshly made coffee and scones. It was a crisp, clear autumn day, and everyone enjoyed the walk through the veld and around the dam. After the morning's birding had been completed, the group was taken to a picnic spot in the poplar forest, where Sarie gave a short talk on the history of the farm and also took some of the birders up to the "Honeymoon Cave".

A record of 66 species was ticked during the course of the morning, with an interesting altercation witnessed between a White-necked Raven and an African Harrier-Hawk. Other interesting sightings included :

- 🦅 Namaqua Sandgrouse, Karoo Korhaan, Secretary Bird, Steppe Buzzard, Rock Kestrel,
- 🦅 Fairy and Paradise Flycatchers, Long-billed Crombec, Grey-backed Cisticola, Namaqua & Rufous-eared Warblers, Red-capped Lark, Wattled Starling, Brown-throated Martin, Pearl-breasted Swallow, Canaries : Yellow, Cape and Black-headed,
- 🦅 White-breasted & Reed Cormorant, Little Grebe, South African Shellduck, Yellow-billed Duck, Hamerkop, Red-knobbed Coot, Cape & Red-billed Teal and Black-winged Stilt.

Another interesting sighting on the same day was reported by Leonie Fouché and Lee Visser, who saw a bright green flash caused by an object flying down from the sky at a tremendous speed and disappearing behind the flat-topped mountain as one reaches the plateau at the top of Ouberg Pass, on the road to Murraysburg. No-one else witnessed this phenomenon and it remains a mystery as to what exactly it was that the two birders saw so early in the morning.



The group having a braai in the poplar forest.

Please let us have any snippets you would like to share with others here on the Twitching Post.

NEXT OUTINGS

The Graaff-Reinet Bird Club would like to encourage members to each volunteer a turn in arranging an outing. With enough co-operation, you need not have more than one turn per year! Each Convenor will be responsible for :

- ✓ Identifying the venue and obtaining the necessary permission from the landowner,
- ✓ Planning the route and conducting a recce beforehand, if necessary,
- ✓ Liaising with the Chairman or Vice-chairman and relaying this information timeously to the Club Secretary (Judy Caryer), who will then notify all members,
- ✓ Ensuring that braai wood, grid and fire-lighters are transported to or available at the venue,
- ✓ Appointing additional Group Leaders, depending on the size of the group,
- ✓ Bringing with the Club's Clipboard and Bird List (to be collected from Judy Caryer),
- ✓ Submitting a report on the outing and the completed Bird List to the Club Secretary within a week after the outing,
- ✓ Traditionally there is no outing in January.

Outings are scheduled for the **1st Saturday of each month**, unless this clashes with another important event, in which case the alternative will be the previous or next Saturday. The meeting place remains the same, namely in front of the Department of Agriculture / Environmental Affairs Building in Bourke Street, Graaff-Reinet ~ unless otherwise informed. Details of each outing will be confirmed about two weeks in advance. Time of departure varies according to the season, but we do try to hit the road between 5am and 6am in the summer and by 7am in the winter. Bring along a breakfast snack (to be enjoyed on the trot), something for the braai after the outing, and a chair. Don't forget your binoculars, field guide, hat, sunblock and H₂O! Comfortable, yet sturdy, walking shoes are a must. And now that we are in the thick of winter, remember your gloves, jersey and windbreaker!

The table below contains a provisional schedule of outings for the next few months. Kindly note that this programme is not cast in stone, but at least it will assist our members (especially those living further afield) with their forward planning. Confirmation will be given by way of each quarterly newsletter and Judy will send out separate notices of each outing well in advance. Please let us have your suggestions on any other suitable localities we should consider.

DATE OF OUTING	LOCALITY	CONVENOR	TELEPHONE NO.
JULY 2012 Saturday the 7 th	Camdeboo National Park Eerstefontein Trail	Jerry Rose-Innes	049-8910255 084 437 4790
AUGUST 2012 Saturday the 4 th	Roodebloem (Graaff-Reinet district)	Tim Hobson	049-8910412
SEPTEMBER 2012 Saturday the 1 st	Vrede (Camdeboo/GRT dist.)	Zorb Caryer	049-8910353
OCTOBER 2012 Weekend 5 th – 7 th	Blue Hill Escape (Baviaanskloof area)	Leonie Fouché	049-8923200
NOVEMBER 2012 Saturday the 3 rd	TBC in next newsletter		
DECEMBER 2012 Saturday the 1 st	TBC in next newsletter		

(TBC = to be confirmed)

(Blue = special event, please support)

(TBS = to be supplied)

SPECIAL EVENTS

Interesting Birding workshops and excursions take place from time-to-time and members will be kept informed about them. Please support these events.

Some exciting forthcoming attractions are :

- 🦅 July 2012 CAR & CWAC winter surveys. Please don't forget!
- 🦅 14th – 16th Sept 2012 SASOL / Stretton Honorary Rangers Birding Weekend at Karoo National Park (Beaufort West). Contact Maria Andela on mtandela@beaufortwest.net
- 🦅 8th – 10th Feb 2013 SASOL / Golden Gate Birding Weekend, being arranged by Golden Gate Highlands National Park's Honorary Rangers. The new Vulture Hide will be operational by then. Contact Elinda Meintjies on cell no. 082 820 5212 or email on elinda@vodamail.co.za
- 🦅 1st – 5th March 2013 BirdLife SA Flock at Sea AGM. Cape Town to Walvis Bay on the MSC Opera. Special discounts and a full programme. Don't miss out on this fantastic opportunity. For more information visit their website <http://www.birdlife.org.za/events/flock>
- 🦅 Japie Claassen of Karoo Birding Safaris arranges small tours throughout SA, as well as neighbouring countries such as Namibia, Botswana and Mozambique. Contact him at karoobirding@beaufortwest.net if you want to be placed on his mailing list.
- 🦅 Members are encouraged to join **GRANAAT**, our local Environmental Interest Group. They meet on the 2nd Tuesday of every month. Please contact any of the following for more information : Paul Inman (049-8910590), Theuns Eksteen (049-8922983), or Dal Morrison (049-8922333).
- 🦅 **IMPORTANT** : There is a special **ANTI-FRACKING** Rally and Workshop being held in Nieu-Bethesda 27th – 28th July 2012. Entrance is free and all are welcome, but booking is essential. For further details and to book, send an email to climatejusticecampaign@gmail.com

In addition there will be a special morning market on Saturday 28th, plus an exciting evening concert with Steve Newman and Greg Georgiades. Concert tickets are selling at R100 each. Please phone 049-8411 642 or 072 742 7113 for more information.

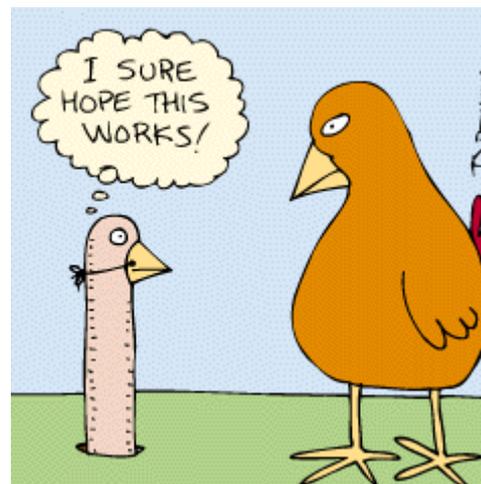
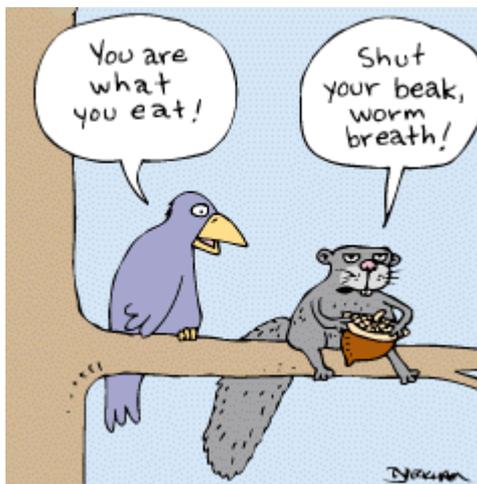
BIRDING TIPS : CALLING BIRDS

In our previous issue, we discussed the pros and cons of using call playback (bird calls) when out in the field. So what about bird pishing? Wikipedia describes it as follows :

*“pish is an imitated [bird call](#) (usually a scold or alarm call) used by [birders](#) and [ornithologists](#) to attract birds (generally [Passerines](#)).^[1] The action of making the sound is known as **pishing**. This technique is used by scientists to increase the effectiveness of bird diversity surveys, and by birders to attract species that they might not otherwise see.”*

Simply put, one attracts the attention of birds by softly sounding *pish, pish, pish* or *psssh, psshh* and out of curiosity, some birds may well respond and fly closer to investigate. The efficacy of pishing and whether it should be used or not, is a controversial topic and it is usually recommended that it be kept to a minimum, so as not to disturb or distress birds. It can also be extremely irritating to have an over-zealous pisher in your company, who is literally drowning out the natural bird song (which other birders are trying to hear and identify) with their loud and continuous pishing.

LARKING ABOUT



[Source : <http://my.pclink.com/~rlovgren/birdtoon.htm>]

GRAAFF-REINET BIRD CLUB CONTACTS

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Vice-Chairman	William Luckhoff	049-8922893	7 Olivier Dippenaar Street GRT
Secretary & Treasurer	Judy Caryer	049-8910353	caryer@isat.co.za
Newsletter & Publicity	Leonie Fouché	049-8923200	fouchel@camdeboo.gov.za

Additional Member		Anna-Maree Vorster	049-8922032	VorsterinGR@telkomsa.net
Additional Member		Pierre Strydom	TBS	TBS
BANK	BRANCH CODE	ACCOUNT HOLDER	TYPE OF ACCOUNT	ACCOUNT NUMBER
ABSA	334-216	Graaff-Reinet Bird Club	32-Day Notice A/C	92 7339 5998

i A FRIENDLY REMINDER...

ANNUAL SUBS ARE RENEWABLE IN MAY EACH YEAR. For only R30.00 you can participate in one of the fastest-growing recreational hobbies in the world, go on a monthly outing and receive a quarterly Newsletter!

We regret to advise that persons who have not paid their subs for the past 2 years are in the process of being removed from our database.

Please submit your interesting stories & events for inclusion in our next Newsletter. 



All photographs by Leonie Fouché, unless otherwise acknowledged. All articles are published in good faith.

SPECIAL FEATURE ON AMUR FALCONS APPEARING ON PAGES 9 - 15

Some of you may already know about this, but should find it fascinating reading about it again – Jeremy Anderson. (This article appeared in The Star, on 27 & 28 June 2011.)

FLIGHT 95773 (by Shaun Smillie)

She's the pilot. The sole passenger. The navigator. The engine. The refueller. She's Flight 95773. It is the first day of autumn, one year ago. She lifts off on an epic 14 560km journey. Part of this will be a five-day non-stop 5 912km flight, mostly over the Indian Ocean, a journey one scientist describes as "amazing".

She's an Amur Falcon, a small bird of prey not much bigger than a pigeon. Falcon 95773 is built for long-haul flight. Her sleek tapered wings power her to speeds of more than 50km/h and allow her to glide on thermals for long distances. The small shark-toothed markings on the feathers of her breast reveal she is an adult.

What makes this Amur Falcon special is that sitting on her back is a matchbox-sized GPS transmitter that will beam data to several satellites orbiting 850km above the earth. Tracking 95773 will be expensive. The 5g transmitter on her back costs R26,000. Add another R26,000 to download the information from the satellites.



She is one of 10 falcons that were trapped in Newcastle last January and fitted with transmitters. The people behind the venture don't believe in giving birds names, but they have given her, and nine other falcons, numbers. Each is the ID of the GPS Platform Terminal Transmitter (PTT) strapped to their backs. Hers is PTT 95773.

The bird lovers and scientists behind the venture are hoping these small birds with their tiny transmitters will solve one of ornithology's great mysteries. Where 95773 is heading on that first day of autumn is known. The mystery is her route, not her destination: the breeding grounds of Mongolia. For a long time ornithologists have debated the route that Amur Falcons take to Mongolia. There have been attempts to plot the transcontinental migration, but all ornithologists have been able to rely on are odd sightings through east Africa and the Middle East. Whole legs of the journey have been missing. But advances in technology and the work of a handful of amateurs will change this. Here's how the story goes.

On January 10 last year, Professor Bernd-Ulrich Meyburg arrives in Newcastle, KwaZulu-Natal, from Germany. He's a plastic surgeon with a passion for birds. Meyburg has made a name for himself in birding circles from the work he's done in studying the migration paths of birds of prey. He says a book about the Lesser Spotted Eagle sparked his passion as a schoolboy in West Germany.

On reading the book, the youngster becomes fascinated with the bird's long migration to southern Africa. By 1994 the fall of the Berlin Wall and access to satellite telemetry finally allow Meyburg to fulfil his childhood dream. He and his wife, Christina, fit transmitters to four adult Lesser Spotted Eagles and track the complete migration of one of the birds to Zambia. Transmitters become smaller and smaller and he then tracks the migrations of other raptors. In 2008 Meyburg is given a prototype transmitter to test. It weighs about the same as a teaspoon of sugar – just 5g. On August 9, 2008 he fits the transmitter to an adult female Eurasian Hobby he catches near Berlin.

Meyburg follows the Hobby's migration to Angola. It flies via the island of Elba, south into North Africa and arrives in Angola 49 days later. With this success, he wants to try the transmitter on something even smaller. His choice: the Amur Falcon. His destination: Newcastle. The reason: just 1km from the town centre is the largest-known roost of Amur Falcons in the world.

Between December and March every year, an estimated 26 000 Amur Falcons take up residence in the tall pine trees that line Allen Street, a major thoroughfare through the town. The ideal spot to catch the falcons. The problem: how to do it. About two months before he arrives in South Africa, Meyburg approaches Birdlife Northern Natal.

“He asked us if we would be able to capture the falcons using high-altitude nets,” veteran bird ringer Rina Pretorius remembers. At the time Pretorius knows a lot about mist nets and catching birds, but she's never heard of an Amur Falcon being caught using these nets. The problem: they fly too high, and if the birders want to catch them they will need to raise the nets tens of metres alongside the pine trees.

Electricity giant Eskom and funding from the local municipality come to their rescue. Cables are strung through the trees, long poles erected and then they put in a pulley system to hoist the nets into the air. By December 12 they are ready for a trial run. Just after dusk Pretorius and the team achieve a South African first. They net their first Amur Falcon. By the end of the evening they have caught five more. Each bird is ringed and released.

It is time to call in the Meyburgs. Bernd and Christina arrive in Newcastle on January 10 and that evening join the bird catchers. They spread out their nets and prepare to raise them as Meyburg lays out the tools and transmitters on the table in the lapa. They are ready.

In the fading light columns of falcons, thousands strong, reel above the roost site. So many that the standing joke among the ringers is not to look up with your mouth open... To draw the birds closer to the nets, the team uses a lure, a method known in ringing circles as “callback”. They have recorded the call of the Amur – kew kew kew... kew kew kew – and play it loudly on Pretorius's bakkie sound system. “The idea,” explains Sylvia Francis, another ringer, “is that birds follow (other) birds that make the most noise because they believe they have the fullest crops. What they plan to do is roost close by and then follow that particular flock, believing they know where there is a lot of food.”

Soon the falcons begin descending, darting among the trees looking for a branch for the night. Then the mist net catches the first of four birds, including 95773, trapped that evening. The catchers untangle the birds from the net, place each in a small cloth bag, and take them to the lapa. Falcon 95773 is the first to be weighed. “Bernd told me that I could do the first bird, because I had prepared all the infrastructure,” Pretorius says.

The catchers have a strict rule: so as not to hinder the flight of the bird, the transmitter cannot weigh more than 3 percent of the bird’s mass. 95773 comes in at 160g. “Bernd suddenly got very excited, his eyes never left that bird,” remembers Pretorius. She rings 95773, measures her and takes a blood sample. Meyburg takes over. He fits a small wire harness across the bird’s chest to hold the transmitter high on her back and positions the antenna to follow the contour of her tail. This is when she becomes 95773.

When they’re done, Pretorius, mindful of the raptor’s sharp beak, carries the bird into the open. Pretorius places her on a chair to give her a few moments to recover from the ordeal of her capture. Then 95773 lifts off into the night. Five days later they meet their target of 10 birds: eight females and two males. With the first part of their mission over, Bernd and Christina Meyburg return to Germany.

This is too early for the launch of her migration, but soon 95773 begins revealing part of the hidden life of an Amur Falcon. “We found out that she moved a lot at night between roosts,” says Pretorius. “The Roberts book said that they hunt only 50km from their roost, but we found her travelling to Memel and Standerton.” In Germany it is Christina Meyburg’s job to access the satellite website and download the data. The first glitch comes soon after the 10 birds are released: three of the transmitters stop working. No one knows why: it might be that there is a glitch with the transmitters, or it could be that three birds have died.

But not 95773. Her transmitter keeps beaming data, and what they learn is that for two months she wanders, criss-crossing northern KwaZulu-Natal, hopping between the different roosts, and then she moves into Swaziland. Amur Falcons favour open grasslands, where they gather in big flocks and feed on insects like dragonflies and flying ants. Sometimes they go for bigger prey, taking barn swallows on the wing. Meyburg and company suspect she is building up vital fat reserves for her journey ahead.

Ornithologists refer to these rest stops as stopovers, migratory bird refuelling stations, where a bird can take time out to carbo-load for the next leg of the journey. Then, at 11am on Friday, March 21 last year, the satellite sends the team the data that they have been waiting for. 95773 has begun her migration to the breeding grounds in Mongolia.

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High above the Lebombo Mountains on the Swaziland border, she crossed into Mozambique. The mountains fell away and then she flew over the flat mopane forests of western Mozambique. She pushed northwards, guided by something we don’t yet understand. 95773’s flight across Mozambique was swift. For 24 hours, she kept on the wing, covering 1,036km. Her journey cut northwards at an average speed of 43.2km/h.

For a while she stuck close to the Zimbabwean border before turning slightly east towards Tanzania. After a night of flight she landed in southern Tanzania. For the next eight days she slowly made her way north. She passed through Tanzania and then Kenya, and on March 30, arrived in southern Somalia. There she stopped for a couple of days. She began moving again on April 5 and progressed slowly into Central Somalia. There again she stopped to refuel, this time for five days.

95773 would have hunted, filling her crop with insects. She'd need the high protein found in the locusts, flying ants and dragonflies to give her the energy for the hardest and most dangerous part of her journey.

Back in South Africa the scientists waited, too – for the first time they would “witness” the transoceanic crossing of an Amur falcon. For the first time the transmitter would tell us exactly where she was when she struck out across the featureless blue ocean. But this still left two of the great migratory mysteries unsolved. The first of these was: how did she navigate? What was the guiding hand that took these long-distance travellers over thousands of kilometres to their exact destination?

Somewhere deep inside the Amurs is an invisible compass that scientists have yet to find and understand. One theory is that it might take its bearing from the sun. But how then did it fly so accurately through the night? Dr Craig Symes of Wits University speculates: “They possibly rely on celestial cues, or magnetic fields, or a combination of both. It’s also possible that different birds use different methods of navigation.”

And then there’s the second mystery the transmitter could not answer. Do birds sleep while they fly? Some biologists believe that migratory birds forgo sleep during these long flights. Others suspect these birds have an auto pilot switch that controls their flight and takes over navigation while the rest of the brain sleeps.

On the morning of Friday April 16, after her five-day rest, 95773, began a journey scientists have called “amazing.” She lifted off and began flying a course parallel to the Somali coast. Below her she would have seen dry scrub land as she passed within a couple of hundred kilometres west of the Somalia capital Mogadishu. Not far from the northern Somalia town of Ufeyn the falcon, with a wingspan about the length of an average home PC, and weighing a little more than a tin of tuna, left the horn of Africa.

Ahead of her was the blue of the sea, the Yemen gulf and an ocean crossing of more than 3,000km. On the next day, Saturday April 17, she was tracked close to the Arabian coast at 6.46am South African time. Just before landfall on the Oman coast her compass told her to change direction, she turned slightly to her right, and the Arab peninsula fell behind her. On Sunday April 18, two days after she had struck out across the sea, 95773’s position at 6.46am was near the Arabian coast.

On Monday April 19 the satellite placed her 270km southwest of Karachi, Pakistan at 5.45. Her oceanic crossing was nearly over. Hours later 95733 was again over land. But she flew on. 95773 had made the crossing in two days and five hours. She was the fastest of the seven remaining birds that continued to be tracked, the first to reach the shores of India.

On Tuesday April 20, at 4:12 am, satellites had her logged in eastern India, she was still on the move. And then on Wednesday April 21 she was near Mandalay in eastern Burma. Here 95773's feet finally touched land, or more likely the branch of a tree.

The nonstop journey of five days had taken her an incredible 5,912km at just under 50km/h. But her journey was not yet over. After a six-day stop, she continued moving slowly north east.

On May 8 95773 arrived. Her transmitter recorded that she was in the middle of the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region of Xilin Gol, about 450km north of the Chinese capital of Beijing. This was the heart of the Amur falcon's breeding grounds. She had travelled 14,560km and she was just half way through her journey.

Some of the other birds hadn't even made the ocean trip in one go. A male called 95775 had stopped over on Socotra island, in the Arabian sea for a couple of hours, before resuming his flight. "Maybe he had a girlfriend there he stopped to visit," laughs Rina Pretorius, the bird lover who had helped trap 95775 and several other Amurs in Newcastle. His crossing was the longest at two days and 18 hours.



Image of male amur falcon courtesy of <http://www.kingfisherecolodge.com/birdwatching.htm>

Shortly after 95773 arrived in Mongolia, the German bird lover who sparked the research, Dr Bernd-U Meyburg and his wife Christina, battled to get a fix on the birds from the weak signals. So no one knows what 95773 did for the next two months. Perhaps she found a mate, and reared a clutch of chicks, as millions of other Amur falcons were doing in Mongolia.

Now the team had its longest wait. Would she fly home? They would know only when the transmission improved. In late October an e-mail landed in Pretorius's inbox. An excited Meyburg told Pretorius 95773 was on the move again. She and the other falcons had taken flight and were now in an area where all seven transmitters could beam information to the network of satellites high above. The wait had ended. Now science had the opportunity to record the full complete migration of an Amur falcon.

On October 28, satellites picked 95773 up in Assam, in Northern India. The large female falcon was the first to leave, again leading the charge. From Assam 95773 passed over Nagpur and Bombay, then across the Indian Ocean. This time her ocean passage was shorter, a distance of just over 2,500km, which she covered in two days of non-stop flight. With landfall came the acacia scrub-land of Somalia, as 95773 turned south flying through East Africa.

Like before, her journey was a mix of quick sprints and lengthy stop-overs. She cut her way further inland towards central Africa. Pretorius followed her progress as she inched closer to Newcastle.

On the evening of November 27, she slept over in southern Zimbabwe, just 75km from the border of South Africa. Twelve days later she crossed into South Africa. On December 11, she slept at Samcor Park in Pretoria and two days later satellites recorded her in Volksrust. The Newcastle roost now just 50km away.

Three days later Pretorius received Meyburg's latest e-mail update. Pretorius grabbed her camera, binoculars and rushed to her bakkie. The e-mail contained co-ordinates and with the help of Google Maps the veteran bird-ringer got a fix. Her chances were slim that mid morning. But she still drove through Newcastle towards the suburb of Lennoxton.

She found the tall lone pine tree. Two kilometres away lay the roost from where, 11 months earlier, 95773 had taken off from a camping chair, carrying some special cargo. The tree was empty. "I just wanted to see the bird, I was hoping maybe I would find her sitting on a nearby telephone line and I would identify her from the transmitter on her back," she recalls.

But Pretorius had missed 95773. The night before, in the rain, 95773 had landed in that pine tree in Newcastle. Her touchdown ended one of ornithology's greatest mysteries – a team of amateur birdwatchers had mapped the epic flight of an Amur falcon. 95773 had come full circle. The falcon had landed.

PROGRESS OF FALCON NO. 95778 : SUBMITTED BY JAPIE CLAASSEN

I would like to share this information with the sabirdnet.

An Amur Falcon was fitted with a transmitter during January 2010, the weight of this bird was ± 155g. Total km done during migration ± 59,000km (with the backpack). Awesome! The non-stop crossing of the Indian Ocean between Somalia and India is between 2,500km and 3,100km average speed ± 42km per hour, duration ± 2.5days!

Below mail from Bernd Meyburg sent out on 11 February 2012 :

.....

Dear All,

This adult female Amur Falcon (*Falco amurensis*) which I fitted with a 5 g satellite tag (No. 95778) in Newcastle (South Africa) in January 2010 has returned to the colony where it was trapped few days ago after a long stay in the Kruger NP in January.

We have several very good fixes (LC:2 and 3) for Newcastle. It can therefore be no doubt that the bird is staying in the colony. According to information from Newcastle there are now thousands of Amurs in the colony at the moment.

The falcon is apparently searching for food some 17 km to the east. We have now tracking data for two complete annual cycles of this little bird spending the summer in NE China where it is probably also breeding.

The data set comprises four non-stop crossings of the Indian Ocean between Somalia and India in spring and autumn.

Kind regards,
Bernd Meyburg

.....

The Newcastle roost is fantastic (Wonder of Nature) The count was > 20 000 in January 2012.

Rina Pretorius
083 327 0789
Newcastle



Image painting of male & female amur falcon courtesy of <http://www.oiseaux.net/photos/john.gould/amur.falcon.0.html>

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IMPORTANT NOTICE

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