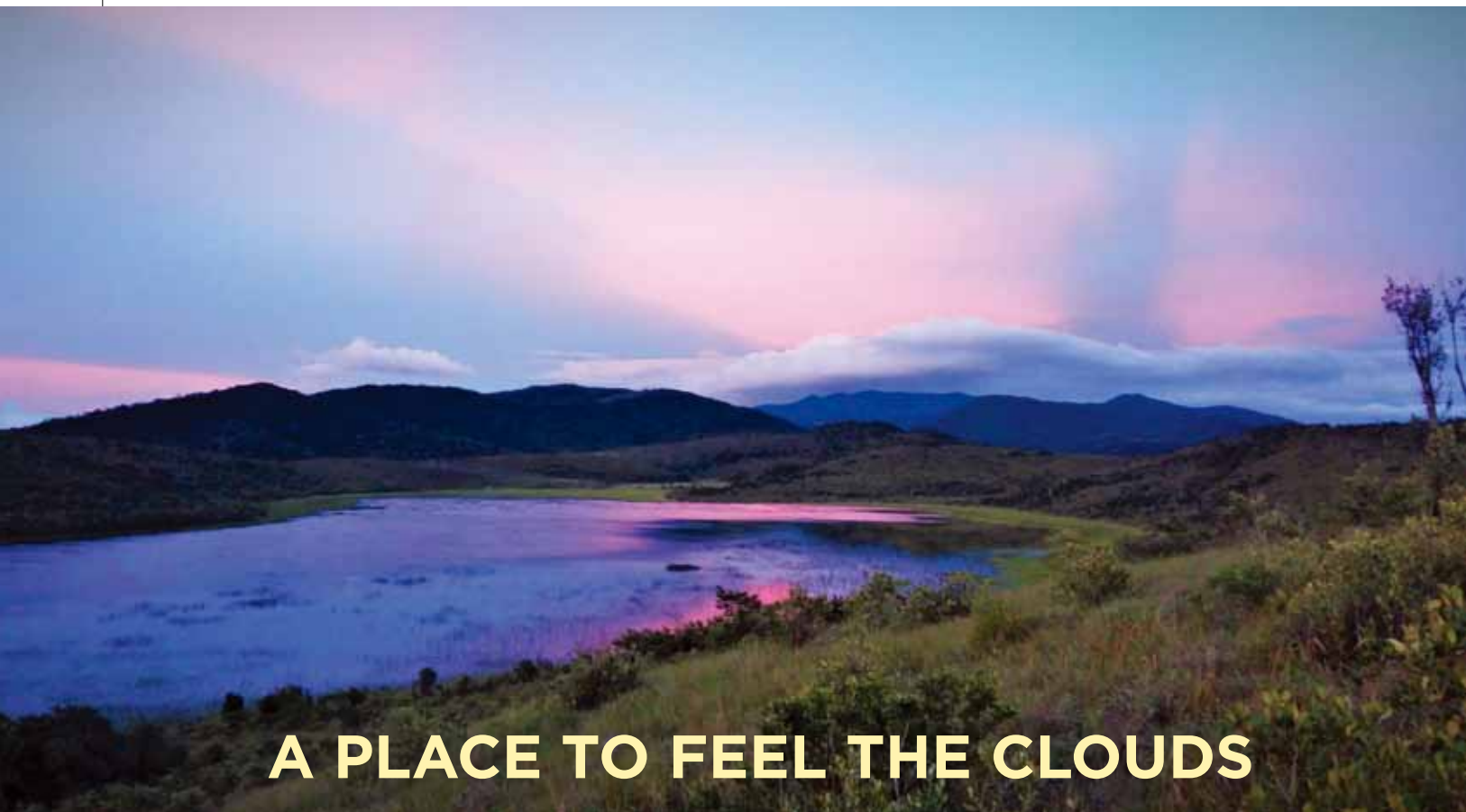


# BIRDLIFE SOUTH AFRICA **news**



## A PLACE TO FEEL THE CLOUDS

DALE WRIGHT (2)

### Expedition to Mahimborondro

**A** remote, high-altitude rainforest in Madagascar that has never been surveyed? I repeated John's words back through the Skype channel like an echo. 'That sounds too good to be true!' But true it was. In northern Madagascar there is an isolated section of rainforest that has recently been declared a protected area and was yet to be explored in any detail by scientists – surely the holy grail for any conservation biologist!

*A sunset view over a freshwater lake and the pristine rainforests of Mahimborondro.*

When John Mittermeier and I met at the International Congress for Conservation Biology in France in 2015, we were drawn together by a shared passion for birds and adventure and immediately began plotting an expedition to a far-flung place. John had previously worked with Dr Lily-Arison Rene de Roland (or Lily, as he is known) of The Peregrine Fund's Madagascar Project. On a recent trip to visit the site of the rediscovery of the Madagascar Pochard, Lily told him about the Mahimborondro protected area and mentioned that as far as he knew, there had

been no detailed scientific exploration of the rainforest.

The Mahimborondro protected area is located in the far north of Madagascar and covers approximately 75 000 hectares. Described as a natural resources reserve, it is characterised by the high-altitude rainforest that covers more than half of its area; lower down, secondary grassland and pasture, as well as small wetlands and marshes, make up the rest. Mahimborondro and the adjacent Bemanevika Harmonious Protected Landscape were both declared protected areas in 2015, thanks



TRISTAN SPINSKI

to the efforts of Lily and The Peregrine Fund. Fortunately, the isolation of the site has meant that it has escaped the habitat loss that prevails across many other parts of Madagascar.

However, such wilderness areas exist precisely because they are hard to reach, and accessing 'the place to feel the clouds', as it is known in Malagasy, at the height of Madagascar's wet season was no easy task. A three-day drive north of Antananarivo, including a final day of 11 hours to cover 45 kilometres through extremely rough terrain, brought us to the Bemanevika field camp. After poring over maps of the area and chatting with our Malagasy colleagues, we identified a route that would then take us from Bemanevika to the even more remote Mahimborondro. At first light the next day our team of 40, including 25 local villagers to help carry our equipment and supplies, set off across the grassland.

The first day's walk of approximately 25 kilometres brought us to a beautiful lake at the southern edge of the Mahimborondro protected area. This was our base camp for two nights as we set out to establish a trail and a camp within the forest itself. Although the grasslands of Madagascar are not particularly rich in species, there are

'specials' wherever you look, a result of the high level of endemism. As we hiked across the degraded grassland habitat we saw Madagascar Larks, Madagascar Cisticolas, Red Fodys and the Madagascar-endemic subspecies of African Stonechat – we even managed to flush a tiny Madagascar Buttonquail.

Our base camp at the lake did not disappoint and our records of the threatened and endemic Madagascar Grebe, as well as adults and ducklings of the Endangered Meller's Duck, provided yet more evidence of the importance of this site for Madagascar's avifauna. As the setting sun's rays filtered through the mists of the Mahimborondro forests beyond the lake, we were treated to silhouette views of a Madagascar Nightjar and a skulking Madagascar Coucal, yet more endemics to add to our list.

Establishing access routes into remote rainforests is definitely not for the faint-hearted, but our team was up to the challenge. Once we'd set up a field camp next to a stream deep within the forest, it was over to the scientists to get to work. The team comprised three ornithologists, two entomologists, two herpetologists and a veterinarian, together with five field technicians from The Peregrine Fund.



above *The Common Sunbird-Asity was widespread throughout the forests of Mahimborondro during our survey.*

above, left *The expedition team, comprising international scientists and local Malagasy field biologists.*

The ornithological field work included making observations as we walked transects in the forest and setting up mist nets near the camp. Fortunately, our survey transects followed a clear gradient that enabled us to record detailed information about the elevations at which the different species occurred. In several instances, the elevation at which we recorded a species was significantly higher than the maximum for that species published in relevant literature. Specific examples where our observations exceeded these maximums by at least 300 metres include Madagascar Harrier-Hawk, Madagascar Sparrowhawk, Crested Coua, Velvet Asity, Red-tailed Newtonia, Spectacled Tetraka and Rand's Warbler.

We were fortunate to come across the occasional bird party, which gave us great sightings of that incredible group of Malagasy birds, the vangas. >





JOHN MITTERMEIER (2)

frog described in 2008. The team found at least five range extensions for amphibians and one specimen that may be new to science. Mahimborondro was also productive, turning up 18 frog and 13 reptile species. The species composition at this site was similar to that at Bemanevika and included *S. nussbaumi*, providing another range extension for this Critically Endangered species. At Mahimborondro there were several range extensions and about five amphibians that may be new to science.

The entomologists collected a total of 70 dragonflies, approximately 100 beetles, 300 spiders and seven zooplankton samples from three different lakes. At their light trap, 350 moths from three major groups, including emperor and hawk moths and geometrids, were collected. Standing with them in the moonlight watching the variety of moths swoop in from miles around was truly magical!

The arduous travelling conditions reduced our survey time in the field slightly, but we still came away with solid data that will be used to inform management of the protected area. While it is a truly incredible experience to visit a remote forest and document its biodiversity, the reason for this adventure was to support the conservation of the site. Fortunately, Lily and The Peregrine Fund, our key local collaborating partner, are the primary management authority for Mahimborondro and Bemanevika and they will ensure that our data feed directly into actions to conserve the site. We left the forest both exhausted and excited, grateful for the wilderness areas that still exist on the planet and determined to ensure their future.

DALE WRIGHT, IBA CONSERVATION IMPLEMENTATION MANAGER

We recorded Hook-billed, Red-tailed and Nuthatch vangas, as well as the stunning Blue Vanga. The bird parties also invariably included Souimanga Sunbird, Madagascar White-eye, Tylas Vanga, Crested Drongo and Madagascar Cuckooshrike. The forest was constantly ringing with the call of the Stripe-throated Jery, alongside the punctuating calls of the bizarre Cuckoo Roller and the turaco-like Blue Coua. A very confiding Rufous-headed Ground-roller was a great addition to the species list and hinted at the lack of human disturbance in the forest.

However, birds were only one component of the expedition and the herpetologists and entomologists had an equally exciting time. The former's surveys in the Bemanevika protected area produced 24 frog and 12 reptile species, including the bizarre-nosed chameleon *Calumma hafahafa*, a recently described (2003) chameleon that has been classified as Critically Endangered, and *Spinomantis nussbaumi*, a



above The Madagascar Grebe is a threatened species that was present at the lake on the edge of the Mahimborondro protected area.

top A confiding Rufous-headed Ground-roller was a great find in the isolated rainforest of Mahimborondro.

## A GUIDE WITH **vision** Bheki Shakes Mbonambi

**T**ucked in against the coastal dune forest of the northern KwaZulu-Natal coastline, the 750-hectare Lake Sibaya, with its pristine, crystal-clear waters and white sand beaches, is a wonder of nature and a jewel in the crown of the iSimangaliso Wetland Park. Growing up in close proximity to this slice of birding paradise, with its abundant wildlife and breathtaking landscapes, had a profound impact on shaping the growing aspirations of Bheki Shakes Mbonambi and setting him on the path to becoming a fully fledged nature guide.

After receiving bird-guide training from BirdLife South Africa in 2008, Bheki went on to establish Sibaya Lake Tours, which specialises in showing both South African and international birdwatchers the avifaunal riches of south-eastern Maputaland. Over the past decade he has established a reputation as one of the region's premier guides, having led innumerable clients to some of the region's specials, which include Rosy-throated Longclaw, Lemon-breasted Canary, Rudd's Apalis, African Broadbill, Swamp Nightjar, Pel's Fishing Owl and Woodward's Batis, to name but a few.

Now one of the senior guides based

in the Maputaland region, Bheki is undoubtedly passionate about the birds and, perhaps more importantly, the habitats of the region and he has taken it upon himself to act as a torch-bearer for conservation in the Mseleni community, which lives close to Lake Sibaya. He has assisted with the collection of IBA monitoring data that contribute to the protection of this site, focusing on the impact that habitat modification has had on bird communities in the Lake Sibaya area.

He firmly believes in giving back and over the past decade has been actively involved in educating young people through the Mseleni Environmental Education Programme, which focuses on explaining the wonders of the greater iSimangaliso ecosystem to schoolchildren in his area. In addition to his environmental education activities, Bheki was involved in the establishment of the Mseleni Indigenous Nursery, which provides seedlings for the rehabilitation of disturbed areas in the Western Shores area of iSimangaliso Wetland Park.

Without a doubt, Bheki Mbonambi has had a profound impact on taking conservation efforts in the Mseleni and



MARTIN TAYLOR

Sibaya area of KwaZulu-Natal province further and he is determined to continue doing so in order that future generations will be able to appreciate the biodiversity of this very special corner of Maputaland.

Swarovski Optik is proud to be associated with this ambassador for conservation and supports him by providing world-class optics in order to further his bird-guiding career and conservation efforts.

Bheki Mbonambi can be contacted on 072 043 4717. For further information about BirdLife South Africa's Bird Guide Training Project, visit the website [www.birdlife.org.za](http://www.birdlife.org.za) or e-mail [martin.taylor@birdlife.org.za](mailto:martin.taylor@birdlife.org.za)

MARTIN TAYLOR,  
MANAGER: SPECIAL  
PROJECTS AND  
AVITOURISM



### THE AFRICAN BIRD FAIR 2019

**B**irdLife South Africa is excited to invite you to join us at The African Bird Fair. The fair will take place over the weekend of 14 & 15 September 2019 at the Walter Sisulu National Botanical Garden in Gauteng. With a wide variety of exhibitors, presentations, guided walks and workshops lined up, it is set to be a weekend not to be missed! For more information, e-mail Emma Askes at [emma.asks@birdlife.org.za](mailto:emma.asks@birdlife.org.za)



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# Owl Awards 2019

Each year BirdLife South Africa presents Owl Awards to its supporters, whether corporates or individuals, who have gone above and beyond to assist the organisation in its efforts to 'give conservation wings'.

## EAGLE-OWL AWARDS

### Kimberley Ekapa Mining-JV

Nature lovers will always associate Kimberley Ekapa Mining-JV (KEM-JV) with Lesser Flamingo conservation, both in the past when the company was responsible for the construction of the flamingos' breeding island on Kamfers Dam and more recently when it stepped in to help rescue of thousands of chicks at the dam. By providing equipment for aerial surveys and sponsoring multiple flights that enabled rescued chicks to be sent to rehabilitation facilities, KEM-JV contributed to turning a potential disaster around. The company also sponsors BirdLife South Africa's KEM-JV Fellow of Conservation position.

### Swarovski Optik

For the past three years Swarovski Optik has championed BirdLife South Africa's Bird Guide Training Programme, providing funding for guides trained by the programme to market themselves at exhibitions such as the African Travel Indaba, The African Bird Fair and BirdLife South Africa's annual Flock events. The company has also generously supplied senior guides with loan pairs of its flagship 10x42 EL binoculars, profoundly transforming their careers. In addition, it has supported The African Bird Fair and advertised in *African Birdlife* magazine. BirdLife South Africa sincerely appreciates the backing provided by Swarovski Optik and Andrew Whysall of Whylo, its distributor in South Africa.

## OWL AWARDS

### Alastair Findlay

A cartoonist by profession and a member of Wits Bird Club, Alastair volunteered his expertise when BirdLife South Africa and the Rare Finch Conservation Group were planning to put together 'Waxi the

Hero', an environmental education puppet show featuring the Orange-breasted Waxbill. He spent many months perfecting the storyline and making the puppets for the first shows, which were performed at the Flufftail Festival in 2017. They were a huge success and were repeated in 2018 and 2019 and presented at The African Bird Fair last year, with scripts updated to reflect relevant topics. It is hoped that every child in South Africa will become acquainted with 'Waxi' and gain insights into the importance of conserving wetlands.

### Charles Malherbe

Charles is the cornerstone of conservation action on the West Coast, actively protecting estuarine IBAs at the Olifants and Berg rivers and Verlorenvlei. He also supports the Biodiversity Stewardship Programme's initiatives by providing labour, materials and expert advice. Among many other achievements, his teams have kept long stretches of the Berg River's banks free of alien vegetation for more than three years, allowing native species to re-establish, and has implemented a similar project at Moutonshoek. By also keeping the waterways free of alien species, he is helping to safeguard water quality, restore biodiversity and increase the systems' resilience to climate change. Charles's tangible results have earned him the respect of partners, landowners and local communities.

### Garth Shaw & Khanyisane Falake

As a teacher at Claremont High School in Cape Town, Garth saw an opportunity to promote birding as an inexpensive extra-mural activity that would nurture an appreciation for the environment. In 2016 he started the Claremont High Bird Club, recruiting colleague Khanyisane to help and subsequently take charge. The

club meets once a week to sharpen skills, undertakes outings, hosts expert speakers and has taken part in two Birding Big Days; last year its members even organised a tour of the Eastern Cape (see *African Birdlife* November/December 2018). Garth and Khanyisane are opening birding to new communities and developing citizen scientists and future conservation leaders in the process.

### Geoff McIlleron

For five decades Geoff has been involved in birds and birding and keen to encourage birding skills and love for the environment in others. His efforts have ranged from guiding the establishment of the Sasolburg Conservation Society to playing a leading role in Wits Bird Club and now in the Nature's Valley Trust, where he helps to raise awareness of the environment among the community in general and schoolchildren in particular. His photographs have illustrated many birding books, but he is perhaps best known for his work with Peter Ginn, with whom he shared authorship of *The Complete Book of Southern African Birds* and *The Ultimate Companion for Birding in South Africa*, among others.

### Jessie Walton

An example of an ordinary person getting involved in citizen science and academic research, Jessie runs a small nursery on her farm in Elgin, rehabilitates injured birds and participates in conservation projects. For more than 10 years she has been collecting data and samples for the 'mystery buzzard' project; for six years she and Rob Martin were field monitors on EIA projects (she discovered the first known Black Harrier roost during this time); and in 2012 she began a long-term project on the Brown-backed Honeybird and Karoo Prinia that

has evolved into research into the co-evolution of brood parasites and their hosts. Her conservation work includes the Western Cape Wetland Rehabilitation Project to create habitat for waterbirds in agricultural landscapes.

### Judy Stockill

Judy, a tireless supporter of BirdLife South Africa and longstanding member of Rand Barbet Bird Club, instigated a birding education initiative for golf caddies at the Parkview Golf Club after encouraging her regular caddie, Shorty, to notice the birds around them. She arranged for Samson Maluadzi, a BirdLife South Africa-trained guide, to train Shorty and two other caddies in their home language of tshiVenda; put up a garden birds poster in the caddies' changing room; and organised a morning with guide Raymond Rampholokeng in Soweto to learn about bird guiding as a business option.

### Kevin McCann

Kevin has made enormous contributions to bird conservation, mainly in KwaZulu-Natal, on a number of fronts. While working for EWT, he led research and conservation initiatives of the South African Crane Working Group and laid the groundwork for other crane-oriented projects still running today. He went on to work for Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife, where he was responsible for establishing the KZN Biodiversity Stewardship Programme, resulting in the first Biodiversity Stewardship protected areas being proclaimed in 2009. He continues to drive this form of conservation in the province and has become a respected proponent of it. A keen supporter of BirdLife South Africa's IBA and Policy & Advocacy programmes, Kevin most recently has partnered with the former to implement conservation work in southern KwaZulu-Natal, particularly in relation to mistbelt grasslands and the Blue Swallow.

### Martin & Melanie Potgieter

By donating their time, mileage and local expertise, A-list volunteers Martin and Melanie contribute enormously to



MARK D. ANDERSON

the IBA and Terrestrial Bird Conservation programmes in the Free State. Having been atlasing for SABAP2 since 2009, they have submitted 1220 full protocol cards for more than 250 pentads, paying particular attention to the Rooiberg-Riemland IBA near Bethlehem. They monitor Southern Bald Ibis breeding and roosting sites around Fouriesburg, Bethlehem and Clarens, submitting valuable reports to the project, and have contributed reports of sightings and nest locations to the Secretarybird project. Less tangible but no less important, their example encourages others to volunteer for conservation-related projects.

### Rozanne Fleet

In the aftermath of the fires that ravaged Knysna and Plettenberg Bay in winter 2017, Rozanne mobilised an army of 'guardians' to set up feeding stations around the two towns and provisioned them with bird food sent down by Elaine's Birding & Wildlife Products in Gauteng. She also launched a Facebook page, Garden Route Birds, as a platform to share information about responsibly helping birds until the area recovered. Now that the crisis is over, the Facebook page focuses on making people aware of the region's bird diversity and providing information about feeding birds sustainably. With 10000 followers, it has

*The recipients from left to right: back row Alastair Findlay, Judy Stockill, Kevin McCann, Melanie and Martin Potgieter, Andrew Whysall (Swarovski Optik) and Peter Hohne (Kimberley Ekapa Mining-JV). front row Rozanne Fleet and Ro'ees van der Speck (Owl Award on behalf of Garth Shaw and Khanyisane Falake). absent Charles Malherbe, Geoff McIlleron, Jessie Walton and Rocco da Silva.*

become one of the most influential social media outlets on birds in Africa.

## OWLET AWARD

### Rocco da Silva

Inspired by his love for the marine environment and penguins in particular, 10-year-old Rocco set up The Future Kids to inform children and adults about pollution. In little over a year he has organised about 15 beach clean-ups involving more than 100 participants, who have removed hundreds of kilograms of rubbish. He has also given talks at green awards ceremonies and travels to schools and groups to spread the word of keeping the environment clean. SANCCOB has benefited from a donation of R10 000 from The Future Kids, and Rocco himself 'adopted' a penguin at the facility, covering the cost of a bird from check-in to release. He is challenging pollution head-on and encouraging others to do the same.



## BBD GOES TO THE PROVINCES

### Provincial challenges in the 2019 event

Participation in Birding Big Day (BBD) continues to increase each year, as does social media coverage of the event. And in 2019 we expect even more growth, as BBD will take place later this year, on Saturday, 30 November, giving migratory species such as Amur Falcons time to arrive and lengthen the species lists.

Always keen to find new ways to improve BBD, we listened to participants' calls for a provincial challenge and will be implementing it this year: the data recorded by BirdLasser users will be sorted into provinces, a move that we hope will present a more level playing field. So all the sightings logged on BirdLasser will automatically appear on national and provincial maps. If a species is logged in Cape Town, it will be



counted on the South Africa map and on the Western Cape map – but not on the maps of the other provinces. Teams that want to target the provincial challenge will have to ensure that they stay within the chosen province.

So why not challenge your friends to a provincial competition? You may be the first team to become a provincial champion!



Competition aside, BBD is about enjoying the exceptional diversity of birds in South Africa, so please participate and help us tell everyone how wonderful our birdlife is.

You need to register before taking part. For more information, visit [www.birdlife.org.za/support-us/events/birding-big-day-2019/](http://www.birdlife.org.za/support-us/events/birding-big-day-2019/); to register, go to [www.birdlife.org.za/support-us/events/birding-big-day-2019/birding-big-day-2019-entry-form/](http://www.birdlife.org.za/support-us/events/birding-big-day-2019/birding-big-day-2019-entry-form/). To find out more, you can also e-mail me at [bbd@birdlife.org.za](mailto:bbd@birdlife.org.za)

ERNST RETIEF, MANAGER:  
DATA AND SPATIAL PLANNING

## CONSERVATION: A NEW ROLE

Dr Hanneline Smit-Robinson has taken up the position of head of conservation at BirdLife South Africa. She holds a doctoral degree in Molecular Zoology from the University of Stellenbosch and subsequently carried out postdoctoral research in phylogeography (using population genetics to consider the geographic distribution of a species) at the University of California, Berkeley. She was also the African recipient of the L'Oréal-UNESCO for Women in Science Award in 2008.

In her previous role as the manager of the Terrestrial Bird Conservation Programme, which she held for nine years, Hanneline gained significant conservation, research and management experience, which stands her in good stead in her new position. Her key responsibilities include oversight of BirdLife South Africa's various conservation programmes. Some strategic changes to the Conservation Division are anticipated so that the team can continue to carry out innovative

and effective work and expand its involvement into southern Africa.

BirdLife South Africa has to align its work with BirdLife International's strategy, due for revision in 2022, and with the biodiversity targets set at the Convention of Biodiversity Conference of Parties in China in 2020. We will continue to support the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) with its work in Africa, especially on the East Atlantic Flyway, and to assist other BirdLife partners on the continent. However, the local focus will not be lost and will include, for example, continued support for the government in its implementation of the National Protected Area Expansion Strategy.

Hanneline looks forward to leading BirdLife South Africa's team of passionate and dedicated conservationists in their efforts to protect this country's threatened birds and their habitats. With her strong academic background, she advocates that conservation decisions



should be based on high-quality science. She enjoys cultivating both personal and professional relationships with colleagues and strategic partnerships with like-minded organisations to the benefit of the birds of South Africa.

## ISABEL EARNS HER PhD

Isabel Human, BirdLife South Africa's HR manager and PA to the CEO, started her PhD research in 2012 while still employed by the Department of Zoology and Entomology at the University of the Free State. When her research proposal was accepted, she officially enrolled for the degree in 2014 and completed it successfully in 2018.

'Forever curious, I wanted to explore the Okavango Delta with my former colleagues in the aquatic ecology research team at the University of the Free State,' explains Isabel. 'Being the single mother of three children and pursuing a full-time career made completing the degree challenging, but the achievement is reward beyond measure. I will always be grateful for the support I received from the university, and Dr Cawood and Professor Van As in particular, and I am also indebted to Mark Anderson and BirdLife South Africa for giving me the space to finish it.'



## ALL TOGETHER

Because we at BirdLife South Africa are carrying out our work all around the country, an annual meeting each year is incredibly valuable in that it enables us to update one another on what we're doing and hold discussions about key issues and concepts. We can thus carry on our work as a unified team and continue to make progress. We also take the opportunity to bring in guest speakers who provide skills training and help to motivate and inspire us further. The staff meeting this year was held at the Dunkeld Bowls Club in Johannesburg.



# Love birds? We do!



Support BirdLife South Africa and help conserve South Africa's magnificent birdlife. You will receive 6 issues of *African Birdlife* magazine, 12 e-newsletters, a membership card and bumper sticker and, very importantly, you will contribute to the conservation of South Africa's birds and their habitats.

### MEMBERSHIP CATEGORY

Please tick the appropriate box for a one-year membership (South African residents only; please contact BirdLife South Africa for international membership fees).

- Standard  R570  
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 Group Membership  R570  
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(Conservation League Donors need to be signed-up members of BirdLife South Africa and make a minimum donation of R2800. A tax certificate can be issued on request.)  
 Fees are valid until 30 June 2020.

### PERSONAL DETAILS

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