

The BirdLife South Africa Wakkerstroom Project and its relevance to bird ringing

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In 1999 BirdLife South Africa (BLSA) purchased a portion of land within the Wakkerstroom municipal area subsequent to a grant of R1 million from SAPPI (Pty) Ltd. The property is approximately 141 ha in extent and is situated along the western boundary of the Wakkerstroom Wetland Reserve, currently managed by the Mpumalanga Parks Board. Development of the property for the effective running of the Project will be undertaken in phases to facilitate effective realization of goals and to obtain progressive financial sustainability. Some of these phases will, however, overlap or run concurrently.

Phase 1: Occupation of property, renovation of infrastructure and compilation of business plan

The property was officially occupied on 1 September 1999 and an immediate start was made with the renovation of the house which the Project Manager would occupy and initially use as his office. At the same time the numerous internal camp fences on the property were removed and large quantities of scrap metal etc. were disposed of. Renovation of the house was completed during the middle of October 1999.

Subsequent to discussions in the first six weeks with WWF-SA's Forests and Wetland Venture, the need for a detailed business plan became evident and many hours were spent compiling data and writing up the plan.

Phase 2: Relocation of families from the property

Upon occupation of the property it became evident that the three families who had worked for the previous owner, and who were resid-

ing on the property, had to be relocated to facilitate the conservation objectives of the Project, in particular, the establishment of a crane feeding and viewing site. Negotiations were initiated and the families agreed to be relocated under certain conditions. A stand was purchased for each family in the town of Wakkerstroom and the construction of a house on each of these properties was undertaken during December 1999. The last house was completed in March 2000 and the families moved in immediately. Their cattle have been allowed to remain on the property for the next year, but the situation is due for renegotiation in November 2000.

Phase 3: Development of the Guide Training Centre

One of the main focal points for the immediate future is the construction of the Wakkerstroom Training Centre which will mainly be used in the training of bird guides subsequent to the grant from SASOL. Other activities which can be accommodated here include conferences and meetings, environmental education initiatives and visits to the area by Bird Clubs on weekend outings. The centre will accommodate 24 people and will have kitchen, dining-room and laundry facilities. Tenders for the construction have been allocated to contractors and building is expected to commence during April and will be completed by August 2000.

Phase 4: Creation of a campsite and information centre

Owing to the lack of such facilities and the definite need indicated by market research amongst visitors to the Wakkerstroom area,

the development of a camping site on the property has also been decided on to accommodate that section of the tourism market. The building of an information centre is also planned which will be used to inform visitors of facilities and services available in the area as well as particular conservation activities in progress. Plans have already been drafted and approved and building and development will commence as soon as sufficient funding for this purpose has been obtained.

Phase 5: Establishment of a crane feeding and viewing site

BLSA will, with the co-operation and assistance of the South African Crane Working Group (SACWG), establish a crane feeding site on the Wakkerstroom property. The aim is to provide a safe and reliable winter feeding ground for the Crowned Crane *Balearica regulorum* and Blue Crane *Anthropoides paradisea* occurring in the area. Hides will be erected to allow good views of the birds by visitors. SACWG has indicated that the site could be used as a place where rehabilitated cranes could be released after treatment.

OTHER ACTIVITIES IN PROCESS AND ENVISAGED

a. Development of an integrated management plan

Owing to its close proximity to the Wakkerstroom Wetland Reserve, managed by the Mpumalanga Parks Board (MPB), it has been decided to draft an integrated Management Plan of the property to facilitate complementary management of both areas. Initial discussions were held which culminated in the first Wetland Workshop held on 2 March 2000. Apart from BLSA and MPB, other interest groups such as the Wakkerstroom Natural Heritage Association, SACWG and WWF-SA attended to provide input. The Workshop was chaired by two wardens from the RSPB who acted as objective mediators. They will provide a draft management plan before their

departure to the UK. Follow-up discussions pertaining to relevant issues are envisaged and inputs from other interest groups and individuals are expected in this ongoing process.

b. Establishment of a Community Advisory Committee

Prior to the establishment of the BLSA Wakkerstroom Project, a lot of rumours and expectations were created within the local community of the potential threats and benefits that our presence would generate. To address these issues, a Community Advisory Committee has been established with representation from as wide a range of interest groups within the community as possible. The main aim of the Committee is to inform representatives of the developments and objectives of the project on an ongoing basis to thereby try to alleviate any future misunderstanding and unrealistic expectations. The Committee will have its first meeting during early April 2000.

c. Grassland Biosphere Reserve initiative

The establishment of the Grassland Biosphere Reserve has been a long-awaited initiative which is gaining momentum as more and more interest groups and landowners support the principle of such an area being declared. Three core areas within the Biosphere Reserve have been identified, namely the Wakkerstroom, Memel (Seekoeivlei) and Chrissiesmeer areas. BLSA, in co-operation with the SACWG, has undertaken to do an intensive survey of the Wakkerstroom area and the catchments surrounding it to determine the status of wetlands in the area and to make relevant recommendations with regard to the proper management thereof. It is envisaged that the survey will be extended to cover the whole Biosphere Reserve in future. A number of other actions in this regard will also be undertaken in co-operation with other interest groups in the area.

d. Facilitating research on Wetland and Grassland species

Currently very little is known about some of the critically endangered bird species which are found in the Wakkerstroom area, in particular Rudd's Lark *Mirafra ruddi*, Botha's Lark *Spizocorys fringillaris* and Whitewinged Flufftail *Sarothrura ayresi*.

Some of the outbuildings on the BLSA property will be upgraded and renovated to accommodate visiting post-graduates researching these and other species. On the basis of research findings, recommendations to landowners regarding effective management techniques to promote and sustain the presence of these species on their land will be made.

e. Participation in and facilitation of ADU Projects

The Project Manager has already taken part in the 6-monthly CAR census with the Wits Bird Club in January 2000. Further participation in this and other ADU Projects such as BIRP, NERCS and CWAC is also planned.

THE RELEVANCE OF THE BLSA WAKKERSTROOM PROJECT TO BIRD RINGING

a. Establishment of a Bird-Ringing Station

Subsequent to discussions with and receipt of support in principle for such a venture from the ADU, and SAFRING in particular, plans are under way to establish an inland ringing station in South Africa on the BLSA Wakkerstroom property. The main rationale for the establishment of the Ringing Station would be to determine long-term trends in bird populations occurring in the area. An example of such monitoring which is currently conducted in the area is the annual ringing of Bald Ibis *Geronticus calvus* chicks undertaken by the Wesvaal Bird Club. Access to the wetland proper for this purpose is being negotiated with the Mpumalanga Parks Board and similar discussions have

been conducted with other landowners in the area. A number of landowners have already given permission for access to properties.

This initiative provides opportunities to all ringers to participate in the activities at the Ringing Station. There currently is only one qualified ringer active in the area. Individual ringers or groups of ringers who are interested in assisting with this project should contact me. At least a month's prior notice will be required to facilitate arrangements.

b. Development and presentation of ringers' training courses

Owing to the needs expressed by trainees at this workshop, especially those living in areas a considerable distance away from major centres, it has been decided to develop a training course to be presented at the Training Centre in Wakkerstroom for such trainees which, after successful completion, will qualify them as A-permit ringers. SAFRING is also developing a training course for those qualified ringers who are supervising ringing trainees. A more detailed submission on both these courses is due to be made at the next Ringing Workshop at the end of the year.

c. Next SAFRING Workshop and Conference

After discussions with the representatives from the ADU, and SAFRING in particular, it has been decided to present the next SAFRING Workshop and Conference at the BLSA Wakkerstroom property during December 2000. Accommodation will range from the dormitory at the Training Centre and the campsite on the property, to the caravan park, B&Bs and guesthouses in town. A formal announcement in this regard will be made. All ringers are cordially invited to come and appreciate the beauty of the Wakkerstroom area and its birds.

Please see the Notice at the end of this issue for the details of the SAFRING Workshop and Conference. (Ed.)