



Owl Awards 2021

Citations

Owl Awards

Dullstroom Trout Farm

The Dullstroom Trout Farm has been instrumental in furthering research into and the conservation of the White-winged Flufftail. Dullstroom Trout Farm purchased the property that encompasses most of the Middelpunt Wetland, where White-winged Flufftails regularly occur in summer. In fact, it is the only site in the southern hemisphere with a confirmed breeding record for this Critically Endangered species. A major motivation for the purchase was to secure the flufftail's habitat and protect it from external threats. The wetland has been leased to Middelpunt Wetland Trust since 1994 and the surrounding veld has been used only for cattle grazing, thus ensuring that the overall integrity of the wetland is maintained. For the past 10 years the trout farm has been supporting BirdLife South Africa's research, fundraising and awareness-fostering activities with regard to White-winged Flufftails at Middelpunt Wetland.

In 2017 Dullstroom Trout Farm joined the Greater Lakenvlei Protected Environment in a bid to improve the protection status of its property from threats such as mining. Together with a neighbouring landowner, it recently expressed the intention to declare Middelpunt Wetland a private nature reserve. The improved conservation status and a management plan for the reserve will ensure that Middelpunt Wetland will provide suitable breeding habitat for White-winged Flufftails for many years to come.

The Dullstroom Trout Farm has led communications with conservation bodies that are active in the area and has consistently provided assistance when requested. The Trout Farm is also represented on the Greater Lakenvlei Landowners Association committee. This committee meets regularly and has made an essential contribution to the current expansion of the Greater Lakenvlei Protected Environment by negotiating with identified landowners and arranging site assessments.

Nicolette Forbes

Since taking over as chairperson of BirdLife eThekweni KZN in early 2019, Nicolette has brought an unparalleled level of energy and innovation to the club. That she has accomplished so much under the trying circumstances brought about by the Covid-19 pandemic speaks even more to the level of her achievement.

Much of Nicolette's overall success can be attributed to her ability to draw in and inspire other club and committee members. Nonetheless, her individual successes are numerous and include organising activities for the club's 70th anniversary in 2019; revamping its website and Facebook page; establishing highly useful WhatsApp and e-mail communication channels; revitalising the outings portfolio; and taking charge of the calendar and ensuring sponsorship, top-quality production and healthy sales to make a handsome profit for the club. She has steered funds to some of BirdLife South Africa's most important projects by taking out Conservation League membership for the club and providing financial support for the Southern Banded Snake Eagle and Mouse-Free Marion initiatives. She organised and co-presented a 'Being a Better Birder' course many times and when Covid-19 lockdowns put a stop to face-to-face activities she took them online to great effect. A strategic planning meeting and AGMs (at Mt Edgecombe and then online) she took in her stride, she organised a photographic competition for members, and she initiated and led a new project to maximise SABAP2 coverage in the eThekweni area. But perhaps Nicolette's greatest achievement has been her meticulously planned effort to revive the club's membership. Almost single-handedly, she identified past members who had allowed their membership to lapse and urged them to rejoin. As a result, the number of club members jumped from 189 to 489 during 2019–2020 – a landmark success.

Peter Ginn

Over six decades, Peter has gained enormous traction in his efforts to promote birding and make it more accessible to the general public, both as a hobby and from a scientific perspective. His own interest in birds developed while he was engaged on a geological survey in Botswana in the early 1960s and was entrusted with the task of providing fresh meat daily for the team. This he did very efficiently, proving to be a commendable marksman who never wasted a round and kept his colleagues well fed!

It didn't need much of a mind-shift to turn his sharp eye and keen observational abilities to birds and when he was appointed science and geography teacher at Peterhouse High School near Marondera in present-day Zimbabwe, his latent passion for birds grew deeper. Peter flourished in the liberty granted by the school and led many birding outings with the lively boys in his care. At the same time he became a leading figure in the techniques of bird photography and the use and development of bird hides. Many weekends he would spend inside an elaborately constructed contraption overlooking the nest of a particular bird species to record its breeding habits and other data. During this period he produced 10 widely acclaimed birding guides with photographs that are still regarded as significant.

Peter was also involved in producing *The Complete Book of Southern African Birds*, a mammoth landmark publication that he co-authored with Geoff McIlleron and Peter Milstein. Published in 1989, this was one of the last photographic bird books of the pre-digital era. Another major, and more recent, photographic bird book bearing Peter's name is *The Ultimate Companion for Birding in South Africa*, which he and Geoff McIlleron produced.

Although latterly dogged by a number of health challenges, Peter has not been deterred from continuing to share his knowledge at birding outings and other meetings. One of his most recent efforts was the creation of accessible and affordable workshops for young people in the George area, enabling

them to draw on his vast experience. The results can be seen in the half dozen or so enthusiastic and knowledgeable youngsters who regularly attend Lakes Bird Club outings – and are now themselves capable of leading them.

One of Peter's favourite sayings is, 'There is no such thing as a silly question – only an unasked question.' This summarises his tremendous generosity of spirit and indomitable urge to share his knowledge and interest.

Dr Chris Lotz

Chris is the founder and director of Birding Ecotours, an international tour operator specialising in birding and wildlife travel. He is a proud South African and although work pulls him to different corners of the globe, he remains passionate about this country's birds and their conservation.

Chris has steadfastly maintained his support for bird conservation throughout the lifetime of his business and has donated a significant portion of its profits to organisations such as BirdLife South Africa to support work on the conservation of birds and their habitats. He is a generous benefactor to the community bird guides and recently acquired a kayak for one of the Zululand guides who wants to grow his business. He also raised significant funding for the relief of guides affected by the Covid-19 pandemic, in South Africa and across Birding Ecotours' entire geographic footprint.

Chris is liberal with his time and has served for many years as the chair of the BirdLife South Africa List Committee, which produces the organisation's annual checklist. With his colleagues on the committee, he revises the checklist each year, taking into account taxonomic changes and new discoveries. He recently spearheaded the effort to change the names of two birds on the list due to their offensive nature. Chris is a thoughtful, kind and generous person and his support of BirdLife South Africa's work to conserve this country's birds is exemplary.

Sithembiso Blessing Majoka

A field ranger with eThekweni Municipality's Natural Resources Division since 2006, Sithembiso has been involved in the environment and environmental training for most of his professional career. This has been the focus of his work, but spend a few minutes with him and you realise that it's not just a job; his passion for the natural world is obvious and infectious.

A glance at Sithembiso's training and work experience before becoming a field ranger provides insight into a person whose interests and experience are very diverse. It was his love for all things botanical that led to study at the Natal Herbarium and initially set him on a career path into the environmental sphere. Anyone who has walked with him in the veld will vouch for his extensive and detailed knowledge of KwaZulu-Natal's plants and habitats. This fascination for plants is still strong, complementing and serving as a backdrop to his birding. His interest in birds also developed at a young age, during his two-hour walk to school in rural KwaZulu-Natal, and it has developed into a passion that is obvious on any birding outing he leads. He has become a valued member of BirdLife eThekweni KZN, whose extremely interesting and deeply philosophical conversations leave fellow members with a new perspective or understanding.

Sithembiso is happiest when discovering something new about the natural environment and is always questioning. His eagerness to learn from anyone who knows something about a subject is an integral part of his nature, yet he is equally happy to share his knowledge and is a fantastic communicator to both children and adults. The destruction of wild spaces troubles him deeply and he dedicates much

energy to promoting the improvement of habitats. His exploration of many of KwaZulu-Natal's rural areas and his profiling of the birds in these areas has opened hearts and minds to the possibilities that exist in the province for both birding and conservation. Moreover, his focus on both birds and plants makes him a very powerful ambassador for the conservation of birds and their habitats.

Saul Sithole

Saul dedicated 62 years of his life to the study of birds and fossils at the Transvaal (now Ditsong) Natural History Museum and, although he lived during the apartheid era and worked in a sphere where recognition was reserved for educated white scientists, he worked diligently and effectively enough to make his own indelible mark on the history of ornithology in South Africa.

A very skilled craftsman, Saul was in charge of preparing study specimens at the museum. His very fine and accurate work was underscored by an expert understanding of the intricate anatomy of birds and how their unseen organs, muscles and skeleton, as well as feathers and other parts, interact. He was also a keen observer of birds, studying their behaviour while out on field expeditions in order to make his museum specimens more life-like.

Saul was a valuable member of a number of important collecting expeditions in southern Africa, accompanying and assisting acclaimed scientists such as Austin Roberts, Herbert Lang and Robert Broom. At times he was called upon to lead the team of assistants who carried out much of the work on these trips, such was the regard that the preeminent scientists of the day had for his work. When necessary, he also took on the role of translator and cultural guide, thus making a success of expeditions that would otherwise have ended in failure. This, however, was the highest position he could aspire to, given the limits placed on people of colour at the time.

Nevertheless, Saul's six-decade contribution to the fundamental study of ornithology was immense both at home and abroad, and his specimens were exported to such well-regarded collections as that of the Natural History Museum in London and the American Museum of Natural History in New York. Our understanding of birds in South Africa would be so much poorer were it not for Saul's curiosity and dedication.

Gavin Peterson

Gavin is an assistant marine ranger for the Southern African Foundation for the Conservation of Coastal Birds, or SANCCOB, and has been seconded to the African Penguin colony at Stony Point under the auspices of CapeNature since 2019.

Gavin's passion for seabirds, especially African Penguins, is exceptional and he is committed to the conservation of this Endangered species. Under the guidance of various mentors, including Cuan McGeorge and Marcello October, he has acquired important field knowledge and a deep understanding of African Penguins and their conservation at the Stony Point colony. He has become familiar with most of the breeding pairs and has an uncanny ability to identify penguins in need of assistance, whether they are chicks that have been abandoned or birds that have been injured, oiled or are generally showing signs of distress. As an active member of the CapeNature seabird monitoring programme, Gavin helps to conduct breeding and population surveys, but he also spends a lot of time improving the penguins' habitat, implementing measures to counteract the impact of heavy rain and flooding and looking out for signs of predation. As a strong on-the-ground advocate for the conservation of African Penguins who regularly helps researchers to learn more about their ecology, Gavin is an inspiring example of how dedicated field rangers can promote the conservation of endangered seabirds.

Clive Vivier

In 2019 BirdLife South Africa launched the Vulture Safe Zone project, which aims to persuade owners of large tracts of land to manage their properties in ways that are safe for vultures. The Zululand Important Bird and Biodiversity Area encompasses some of the most important breeding and foraging habitat for the Critically Endangered White-backed Vulture in KwaZulu-Natal. Establishing it as one of the first Vulture Safe Zones in South Africa was a logical step, but the project faced numerous challenges. A search for a resident champion who would promote the scheme to local landowners turned up Clive Vivier, who stepped up to the plate and managed to achieve something remarkable. With his trademark enthusiasm, Clive drove the initiative from start to finish, convincing 14 landowners to work together to save Zululand's vulture populations from extinction. The declaration of the Zululand Vulture Safe Zone in September 2020 secured more than 200 000 hectares for vulture conservation – and set the benchmark for all other Vulture Safe Zones in South Africa. Without Clive's drive and energy, this could never have been accomplished.

Crystelle Wilson

Crystelle has been birding for more than 45 years and is a longstanding member of BirdLife South Africa, having joined BirdLife eThekweni KZN (formerly BirdLife Port Natal) in 2008. On moving to Howick in 2016, she also joined the KZN Midlands branch.

Crystelle is perhaps most widely known as the editor of *KZN Birds*, the official magazine of the seven KwaZulu-Natal bird clubs affiliated to BirdLife South Africa, a position she took up in 2009. Since then she has dedicated much time and effort to finding authors and photographers who would provide interesting and informative articles and good-quality images, and then compiling these into the final publication. Club members eagerly look forward to each issue of the magazine, whose content is wide-ranging and covers conservation, various projects, bird observations, rarity reports and club news and activities, as well as notices and advertisements. With the assistance of club members, Crystelle was responsible for arranging the printing and distribution of the hard copy of the magazine. When the decision was made to go digital she was concerned about the transition to the very different electronic format, but she rose to the occasion and the process went off smoothly. She is still in contact with the previous editor of *KZN Birds*, Dr David Allan, and when bird carcasses become available she hands them over to him for the Durban Natural Science Museum. Before BirdLife Port Natal changed its name, Crystelle initiated the club's annual calendar and until recently continued to source photographs and advertising for it. She still assists with selling the calendars, which provide welcome income for BirdLife eThekweni.

A committed atlaser, Crystelle was actively involved in SABAP1 and she has been contributing to SABAP2 since October 2007. The 845 full protocol cards she has submitted for 168 pentads spread across South Africa represent at least 1690 hours of bird monitoring. She has also contributed 277 ad hoc cards for 124 pentads. She is a keen photographer too and has submitted 868 photographic records of 278 species across 18 Quarter Degree Grid Cells to the Virtual Museum's BirdPix repository. She has also been acknowledged for her contribution to the latest edition of *Roberts Bird Guide*.

Owlet Award

Mark Heystek and Justin Ponder

In 2018 the Lakes Bird Club welcomed its first Youth members: Mark Heystek from George and Justin Ponder from Sedgefield. Growing up together, the boys developed a great love for the natural world and in 2017 they discovered birds. Soon afterwards, they met up with Peter Ginn and Christiaan Viljoen, who mentored them and encouraged them to join the bird club, where they could meet like-minded people. Justin and Mark soon became valued members of the Lakes Bird Club, helping to lead outings and contributing write-ups to the *Malachite* newsletter. They have assisted with CWAC counts on Knysna Lagoon and CAR counts in the Uniondale area of the Little Karoo. When Tim Carr started organising pelagic trips from Knysna in December, they were there to help with 'chumming'. On Birding Big Day, they joined Tim on the Ludwig's Bustards team, which attained second place in the Western Cape with 212 species. During the recent hard lockdown, the club organised a challenge for members to record birds from their own properties and Mark and Justin took top places. They performed similarly well in the 2020 Garden Route and Klein Karoo 150-kilometre Challenge. On the club's WhatsApp group, they are usually the first to identify unknown birds correctly.

In mid-December last year, while they were identifying waders at Voëlvlei, an ephemeral wetland south of Mossel Bay, two birds in particular stood out. The boys took photos and sent them to Trevor Hardaker for confirmation that they had discovered a pair of Buff-breasted Sandpipers. Trevor concurred with this mega find, only the 18th record of the species in southern Africa and the first time that two birds together had been recorded here. More than 100 birders came to twitch the sandpipers – a dream come true for the youngsters.

Mark also has a talent for writing poetry and has produced some birding shirts with a charming Cape Batis logo, drawn by him. Justin takes excellent photos and for Christmas 2020 produced two calendars, of which he sold nearly 200 copies. He used the proceeds to purchase his own Vortex binoculars. These are two youngsters whose enthusiastic interest in the natural world, especially birds, is matched only by their determination to pursue that interest.

Eagle-Owl Awards

Geoff Lockwood

Geoff's interest in birds and their behaviour goes back to his early years, when he lived close to the Braamfontein Spruit, Delta Park and the Florence Bloom Bird Sanctuary in Johannesburg, an urban area with remarkably rich biodiversity. In 1976, as a young member of the Witwatersrand Bird Club, he met Norman Bloom at a monthly outing to the Florence Bloom Bird Sanctuary and became involved in the transformation of the Delta Sewage Works building into what is now the Delta Environmental Centre. Norman was chairman of the Witwatersrand Bird Club and Geoff was invited to serve on the club's committee. This in turn led to a position on the council of the South African Ornithological Society, which he continued to hold when the society became BirdLife South Africa in 1996. He finally stepped down after 27 years of service to both the Wits Bird Club committee and the BirdLife South Africa council.

Bird-ringing has always been of particular interest to Geoff and he has collected substantial records over the years. A personal highlight for him was the long association with a Cape Robin-chat that he ringed after it became trapped in the Delta Centre building on 25 May 2000. It remained in the vicinity for more than 18 years, setting a record of known longevity for the species.

Geoff and his wife Cynthia have spent their entire married life in the flat on the upper floor of the Delta 'tower' – a prime site in Johannesburg for watching birds – and he has amassed an enormous collection of records of bird sightings for this extensive 'green lung' in the city. As resident manager and education officer at the Delta Environmental Centre, Geoff developed many skills relating to nature conservation and environmental training, with a strong focus on birds and their behaviour. His close involvement with owl pairs and their offspring at the centre formed the basis of many presentations to a wide variety of audiences. These helped to create awareness, especially among young people and local government decision-makers, of the need to protect raptors in urban environments. A nest box 'relationship' between Spotted Eagle-Owls and Egyptian Geese is also well-documented.

Geoff's involvement in an extensive study of African Grass Owls in a residential development near Irene led to a stint as co-chair of the Endangered Wildlife Trust's African Grass Owl working group, where he made a significant contribution to the long-term conservation plans for this Vulnerable species. Another long-term project involved the capture and relocation of oxpeckers. Initially, in 1986, Yellow-billed Oxpeckers were caught in eastern Caprivi and re-introduced into what is now the Hluhluwe–iMfolozi Park in KwaZulu-Natal. Two years later, Red-billed Oxpeckers were relocated from the Kruger National Park into areas where they had died out. Geoff continued to run these capture operations for eight years.

Always ready to share his knowledge, Geoff has been involved in the West Rand Honorary Rangers' annual birding weekends in the Kruger Park since their inception and is a popular guide at these important fundraising events. He also supports the Friends of Nylsvley and the Friends of Verloren Vallei nature reserves by presenting courses and guiding bird and wild flower walks.

An active atlaser, Geoff contributed to SABAP1, has submitted more than 1400 full-protocol cards for SABAP2 and served on the steering committee for the latter, helping to develop protocols and oversee the rollout of this important initiative. He is a regular participant in BirdLife South Africa's annual Birding Big Day, guiding the Verlorenkloof Falcons for the past 10 years.

Bird clubs still form an important part of Geoff's birding career. He has served as Honorary President of the Rand Barbets Bird Club since it was established 30 years ago, is an honorary life member of the Wits Bird Club and BirdLife Free State, and continues to present talks and courses at various clubs to promote the awareness, enjoyment and conservation of our amazing birdlife. He also regularly answers queries about birds from the public, media and bird club members.

His artistic talent found an outlet in the 1985 edition of *Roberts Birds of Southern Africa*, in which his paintings accompanied those of Ken Newman. Geoff also wrote and illustrated his popular *Garden Birds of Southern Africa*, published in 1981, and wrote *Birding with SAPPI and Geoff Lockwood* in 2000. In the foreword to the latter, BirdLife South Africa's CEO at the time, Dr Aldo Berruti, aptly described Geoff as 'South Africa's best-known birder and raconteur of birding tales'.

Mabula Ground Hornbill Project

The Southern Ground-Hornbill, a long-lived species that breeds cooperatively, is listed as Endangered regionally and Vulnerable globally, and as well as being ecologically important it is culturally significant, being widely known as the 'thunder bird' or the 'rain bird'. This year the non-profit Mabula Ground Hornbill Project celebrates 21 years of conserving this charismatic species. The organisation is the BirdLife South Africa Species Guardian for the Southern Ground-Hornbill, which in 2020 was the BirdLife South Africa Bird of the Year.

Since 1999, when the first group of re-introduced Southern Ground-Hornbills was released into the Mabula Private Game Reserve in Limpopo, the project has achieved a number of noteworthy successes. It has devised protocols for taking from the nest and rearing second-hatched chicks that would naturally not survive and then re-introducing them into the wild, especially in areas where the species no longer occurred. The artificially raised chicks are released along with adult hornbills that are used to living in the wild and will act as mentors, and they form carefully managed groups called 'bush schools'. These groups breed successfully and rear their offspring, which in due course disperse naturally and form pairs.

Prior to their release into the wild, the young chicks are reared at the Baobab, a specialised centre designed and built by the Mabula Ground Hornbill Project, which also raised the funds needed for its construction.

One of the major limiting factors to the ground-hornbills' breeding success is the loss of suitable nesting sites. The Mabula Ground Hornbill Project was part of a team that recently developed an artificial structure that closely resembles the birds' natural nest – the same size and shape, entrance height, thickness of the walls and micro-climate. These so-called 'super nests' are placed where suitable nest sites no longer exist.

The project benefits from the strong and capable leadership of Dr Lucy Kemp, who is also the African co-chair of the IUCN SSC Hornbill Specialist Group. Internationally respected for her work, she initiated a conservation plan for the Critically Endangered Sulu Hornbill and was a participant in the planning workshop for the conservation of the Critically Endangered Helmeted Hornbill. In Africa, her specific role is to grow capacity within the continent for the conservation of hornbill species in general, as they are woefully understudied and are regarded by the IUCN as Data Deficient. This is of particular concern in view of a burgeoning bushmeat trade; hornbills have been identified as the most traded bird species in West and East Africa.

The Mabula Ground Hornbill Project is widely recognised for its stellar research and re-introduction and conservation initiatives, including comprehensive educational programmes that raise awareness about the Southern Ground-Hornbill and help to minimise threats to it.