



BirdLife South Africa Owl Awards 2023

**19 September 2023, 16h00
Isdell House & online via Zoom**

Recipients' Citations

Alberto Vaccari and Lily Bickerstaffe

Alberto Vaccari and Lily Bickerstaffe are passionate birders and software developers who reside in Switzerland. In 2022 they had the idea of putting their software and online game development skills to good use for birds and bird conservation. They approached BirdLife South Africa in April 2022 and proposed to work together to build an educational bird identification game as a way to inspire and educate more people (and especially young people), no matter what their background or experience level may be. The aim was to provide a platform for people to learn about birds and bird conservation in a fun, engaging way.

And all of this to date is done on a voluntary basis.

And so, Birdle was born (www.birdle.co.za). It is a daily bird guessing game/puzzle, in which players use a picture, a bird call, and different bird characteristics or clues, such as size, habitat and diet, to figure out that day's bird. Afterwards, they receive a pop-up window which teaches them more about the bird, whether it's a short "Did you know" fact, or information about the conservation status of that species, and the work that BirdLife South Africa does to conserve the species or habitat.

So, how is Birdle faring? It has been played over 500,000 times by more than 40,000 unique individuals. There are more than 6,000 daily players. Birdle has generated over 25,000 clicks to BirdLife South Africa's website by players wanting to learn more about birds, our bird conservation work, and our initiatives and events.

As Andy Wassung, BirdLife South Africa's Communications Manager, stated "Other than the game and the benefits it creates for BirdLife South Africa, Alberto and Lily have been nothing short of amazing to work with. Their professionalism, passion and enthusiasm

(including many late night's work) for their work and the conservation of the planet's bird species is notable. Long may our working relationship last, with many more innovative projects together".

Barbara Bickel

Barbara Bickel is a wildlife enthusiast with a deep concern for the state of our natural world. As a result, Barbara has supported several conservation initiatives from her home region of the Sonoran Desert in the United States of America to the high-elevation wetlands of South Africa. Barbara began supporting the White-winged Flufftail Conservation Project in 2021 and continues to support BirdLife South Africa's objective to safeguard this threatened species and its wetland habitat.

The White-winged Flufftail is listed as Critically Endangered, with an estimated global population of fewer than 250 mature individuals. Ethiopia and, more recently, South Africa are the only two countries where the White-winged Flufftail is known to breed, with only one recently confirmed site in South Africa. Populations have likely declined over the years due to the destruction and degradation of its sensitive wetland habitat. Barbara's generous financial support has enabled BirdLife South Africa to improve the protection of key sites, foster better management practices through stewardship mechanisms, design and implement novel wetland management tools, engage with local communities using and benefiting from wetland ecosystem services, and continuing the search for locations with the bird's presence.

Barbara recently donated Swarovski binoculars to Community Bird Guide, Dalu Ngcobo, who works in the Ntsikeni Nature Reserve area. Dalu plays a key role in engaging with the local community and assisting the reserve to safeguard the White-winged Flufftail. Thanks to this donation, Dalu will be able to improve the effectiveness and efficiency with which he conducts bird guiding and monthly biodiversity monitoring surveys. Dalu also acts as an environmental ambassador within his community by demonstrating the potential for deriving a livelihood from nature and influencing the perspectives of the youth and community decision-makers.

Barbara's generous support of BirdLife South Africa's initiatives makes her a very deserving recipient of an Owl Award.

Biodiversity Law Centre

The Biodiversity Law Centre (BLC) is the only non-profit law clinic dedicated specifically to using the law to protect and restore ecosystems and species in southern Africa. Over the past eighteen months, the Centre has provided free legal support to BirdLife South Africa's Policy and Advocacy, Landscape Conservation, and Seabird Conservation Programmes. Two of its inception projects are being pursued in partnership with BirdLife South Africa, and have considerably strengthened our ability to respond to the following two priority issues:

Verlorenvlei

The Verlorenvlei estuary is a Ramsar Site and IBA, being regarded as one of the ten most important wetlands for wading birds in the South-Western Cape. However, the condition of the vlei has deteriorated in recent years. Strategic interventions are urgently needed to prevent the site's further deterioration. The Biodiversity Law Centre has complemented BirdLife South Africa's scientific knowledge with legal advice and support, including by investigating legal avenues for a moratorium on impactful activities in the catchment, supporting engagements with local and provincial authorities, and preparing letters to the Minister of Forestry, Fisheries and the Environment, with suggestions for interventions. The Centre is also assisting BirdLife South Africa with its opposition of a proposed mine in the Moutonshoek Protected Environment (and this has relevance for Verlorenvlei).

African Penguins

The African Penguin is currently categorised as Endangered but, on its current trajectory, is heading towards Critically Endangered. Despite BirdLife South Africa having long recognised the need to explore and potentially pursue legal options for strengthening this species' protection (e.g. from ship-to-ship bunkering), we've lacked the capacity to do so. The Centre has provided invaluable support in this regard – including by investigating opportunities for legal reform, drafting motivations which have been sent to the Minister, engaging with Transnet about existing bunkering licences, and identifying strategic opportunities for future action.

NGOs' efforts to address the rapidly escalating threats to biodiversity are often frustrated by lack of resources to secure legal support. The Biodiversity Law Centre's establishment was therefore much needed. Despite being a young non-profit, with limited capacity, the Centre has invested considerable time in supporting BirdLife South Africa and has actively promoted public awareness about the above-mentioned issues (including through op-eds and interviews).

Kate Handley's dedication to her work, willingness to step in at short notice to address urgent issues, and ability to come to grips with the varied scientific, legal, and socio-economic aspects of these matters are most impressive and highly appreciated; and we believe that the Biodiversity Law Centre's important contributions warrant its receipt of an Owl Award.

Carin Malan

Carin Malan has played an important role as a member of BirdLife Overberg over the last two decades. She served on the committee in various capacities, ending as Vice-Chair. Her main functions were fundraising and to organise and often host guest speakers for the club's monthly meetings. She played a pivotal role in the club's hugely successful charity golf days and Xmas in July fundraising dinners. As a master wildlife photographer, she played a leading role in establishing the club's picture galleries, thus guiding many members into bird photography. She also served as Secretary of the Western Cape Birding Forum for several years and did so with distinction.

Carin was responsible for the development and then coordination of quarterly Coordinated Waterbird Counts (CWACs) at the seven estuaries in the Overstrand local municipal area. Discussions are now underway with various agencies and volunteers for the establishment of similar counts in other areas of the Overberg region, including the De Mond and De Hoop Nature Reserves.

Carin also developed educational resource centres at the fruit farms where she is employed. Through this, she disseminated the annual Bird of the Year posters and educational resources to many schools throughout the Overberg region. Carin has played a supporting role in the establishment and marketing of the Kogelberg Biosphere Wildlife Rescue and Rehabilitation Centre. She is also establishing educational campaigns at local schools in collaboration with the Kleinmond Nature Conservation Association and regularly produces articles for their newsletters. Schools in the region are being encouraged by Carin to establish Eco Clubs. Owl boxes were set up at the two local schools and fishing line bins are being set up along the Kleinmond coastline.

Without doubt, Carin is a very worthy recipient of an Owl Award.

Dominic Naidoo

Dominic Naidoo is a dedicated environmental journalist who writes for Independent Media and [Independent Online](#) (IOL). He is an active and supportive member of Birdlife eThekweni KZN, Dominic is passionate about birds and their conservation, not only in South Africa but around the world.

His passion for birds is shown in his investigation and reporting of the impacts faced by birds in South Africa, and in doing so brings these issues into the public eye. As an illustration of this, there are a few highlights of his work.

In April 2021, Dominic wrote a beautiful and insightful [article](#) on how being around birds makes us happier, citing the scientific support for this thesis. Many birders around South Africa commended and shared this piece. Dominic has also written about bird trade, including of African Grey Parrots. In [September](#) and [October](#) 2022, Dominic reported on the impacts that pelagic fishing has had on African Penguin colonies, with extensive reporting on the drastic decline in South Africa.

His work was recognised by his award as the KZN runner-up in the Sustainability Category in the Vodacom Journalist of the Year 2022 awards for his investigation and reports of the [widespread threats](#) facing South Africa's birds of prey. Working together with biologist Alexandra Howard, the team at Roving Reporters and dedicated conservationists at [Wildlife ACT](#), Dominic conducted an [in-depth investigation](#) into the drastic decline in vulture numbers, particularly in KZN. This article, which was published in the *Daily Maverick*, threw the plight of southern Africa's vultures into the spotlight and he received numerous commendations from conservationists and the public.

Dominic has also published more light-hearted pieces on birds, such as an article on the beloved [Hadedda](#).

Besides being an excellent environmental journalist, Dominic has a passion for environmental conservation with a particular interest in climate change and sustainable urban development.

Gavin Walker

The Walker Family own Eland's Valley Guest Farm outside Dullstroom, a country retreat set in the Mpumalanga Highlands. Eland's Valley Guest Farm supplies Middelpunt Wetland with lateral inputs that maintain the wetland's structure and functionality as the only confirmed breeding site of the Critically Endangered White-winged Flufftail in South Africa.

Gavin quickly agreed to pursuing nature reserve status for his portion of the demarcated area when the declaration was proposed by BirdLife South Africa. Before this, Gavin generously supported Kyle Lloyd's research and stewardship work on his property and even offered accommodation while establishing himself in the community. Gavin's willingness to support conservation in the area was further demonstrated by his financial donation towards the development of the Steenkampsberg Birding Routes in 2022 and 2023.

Following the declaration of Middelpunt Nature Reserve, Gavin has actively assisted in the site's designation as a Ramsar Site, the development of supporting documentation to ensure effective management, and the erection of signage. Without the assistance of Gavin and his family, these initiatives would not have been possible. His generosity and proactive attitude have greatly benefited the White-winged Flufftail Conservation Project and the resulting successes.

John Clements

John Clement has been very involved with citizen science, bird conservation and education for many years.

John has been a regular contributor to the Birds in Reserves Project, and an active participant in the Somerset West Bird Club's Garden Bird Project. He has been a registered bird ringer since 2004, and undertaken weekly ringing at Helderberg Nature Reserve and Silwerboomkloof. He has assisted with the ringing of Cape Sugarbirds, African Black Oystercatchers and migrant terns for various research projects. For example, he ringed more than 1000 terns at Lourens River estuary from 2000 to 2009 and there have been recaptures from 15 countries.

John was actively involved with the upkeep of the Dirk Dent Bird Sanctuary in the Strand from 1990 until 2015. In terms of his involvement with education and awareness, he has trained bird ringers and demonstrated bird ringing to school groups. He is a talented bird artist, and provided art for the Somerset West Bird Club's educational initiatives and publications. He designed the bird club's first two logos.

John has been a member of the Somerset West Bird Club since August 1988, so for 35 years. During this time, from 1990-2015, he was a committee member. He has led club outings, including monthly outings to Dirk Dent, has coordinated the club's engagement with local municipalities, CapeNature, and UCT. His main responsibility on the bird club, however, was Dick Dent Bird Sanctuary.

John has been very committed to his role as a member of the bird club and is held in high regard by fellow club members. John, now 91, is a worthy recipient of an Owl Award.

Karen Bullen

Karen Bullen was instrumental in the founding of the first bird club in Nelspruit, now Mbombela. After the identification by Peter Lawson of dead Bronze-winged Courser, a bird not usually found in Nelspruit, in their discussions Karen suggested that they start a bird club with Peter as the Chairman and her as the Secretary. So began her journey with the formation of the Lowveld Bird Club in 1985 and its affiliation with the then Southern African Ornithological Society, the SAOS.

Karen has served on the Council of SAOS, and as Chairman, Vice Chairman, Secretary and Membership Secretary of BirdLife Lowveld. She continues to be actively involved with the Club.

The roles for which she is well known are her involvement over many years as the Membership Secretary and Assistant Editor of the club's publication, *The Hornbill*. This involves editing articles, doing the page layout and final design, printing hard copies, and distributing the magazine. She has ensured that every edition is of an exceptionally high standard. These skills were put to good use in the production of Peter Lawson's publication, *Birds of Nelspruit*.

Karen continues to be very 'hands-on' as the Club's Membership Secretary. She knows the names and history of every member and has a sound working relationship with the staff in the Membership Office at BirdLife South Africa. She was invited to participate in the Bird Club Indaba that formed part of the Flock to the Wilderness 2023 and spoke about a bird club membership secretary's responsibilities.

Karen arranges for the distribution of hard copies of *The Hornbill* and *African Birdlife* through distribution points in and around Mbombela, and she distributes electronic copies of *The Hornbill* to members, universities and scientific bodies.

In their motivation, BirdLife Lowveld said that "Karen is a blessing to BirdLife Lowveld and BirdLife South Africa and we are privileged to enjoy her tireless efforts and commitment".

Priscilla Beeton

Priscilla Beeton joined the Cape Bird Club in the 1990s and was elected to the Committee in 2008. She served in various capacities before becoming the Chairperson in 2015, a position she held for 7 years until March 2022.

At a Strategy Meeting in 2017, the committee decided on focal areas for the future, Youth, Education, Conservation and Outreach. Priscilla was a founding member of the new Education sub-committee. Thereafter the club's programme came to life in a number of Cape Town schools, and, most importantly, included under-resourced schools. Afternoon trips, workshops and weekend camps were organised and enthusiastically received by learners. Priscilla was (and still is) a driving force in all these activities.

In 2021, Priscilla started producing a monthly, four-page bird-related educational newsletter, called *Birding Buzz*. It is aimed at learners who are aged 8 to 15. As a retired school librarian and a knowledgeable and keen birder, she was ideally equipped to produce these informative, yet fun, newsletter for young people with articles and crossword puzzles and competitions. Priscilla prints and delivers copies of *Birding Buzz* each month to schools where there is a need for hard copies. In this quiet and modest way she is changing lives. Priscilla has now produced 23 issues off *Birding Buzz* and these are on the Cape Bird Club website, where they are available free-of-charge to teachers, parents, and learners alike, anywhere in the country.

The Cape Bird Club stated that "We believe Priscilla is worthy of the Owl Award for this unique contribution - bringing the love of birds, birding and conservation to the South African youth".

EAGLE-OWL AWARDS

Vincent Parker

Vincent Parker has made a significant contribution to the Southern African Bird Atlas Project 2.

Firstly, Vincent submitted 3 374 atlas cards for 1 212 pentads. Not only is Vincent one of the top atlasers in the country, but many of the atlas cards submitted are for areas that have a low coverage, such as parts of the Northern and Eastern Cape Provinces. In addition, he has atlased many of these pentads multiple times.

Secondly, Vincent has been instrumental in ensuring the quality of atlas data. He serves on the Regional Atlas Committees of the Northern and Eastern Cape. In this role he vets incoming atlas data, corresponding with atlasers about their sightings, and verifying the records.

An important contribution lies in his contribution of the second tier vetting of atlas data. In May 2020, second tier vetting guidelines were published and Vincent put his weight behind this process. The task is onerous as it involves revisiting unusual records that had been vetted previous as correct but might not be accurate. This is a very time-consuming process, requiring a lot of dedication. Vincent has checked hundreds of these records.

Vincent's has also assisted with the vetting of species splits, such as Northern and Southern Black Korhaan, Yellow and Cape White-eye, and Karoo and Olive Thrush.

Lastly, Vincent has also played a significant role in helping the SABAP2 management team in vetting data for Mozambique. As there are no existing atlas data to test new submissions against, almost all data submitted to SABAP2 generates Out of Range forms which need to be dealt with promptly. Vincent has been a big help with vetting these incoming cards and records.

Vincent's contribution to SABAP2 (and earlier to SABAP1) has been immense, both on the submission of records and on the vetting of submitted data.

Although the nomination for Vincent to receive an Eagle-Owl Award was for his contribution to SABAP, it is also worth mentioning his authorship of a number of important books.

Nick Prentice

Nick Prentice is a former Treasurer and Global Council Member of BirdLife International. Nick served for many years in these capacities, offering his expert tax and financial knowledge as a partner at EY and combining that with his passionate interest in birds to further their conservation.

Nick is also the Chairperson of the South Georgia Heritage Trust, an important international fundraising vehicle for this very important island for breeding seabirds. He has provided financial support for several rodent eradication projects, including South Georgia, Gough and Marion Island.

Nick has also contributed to bird conservation in other areas of the world, including a tropical lowland rainforest project in Sumatra, Indonesia. In his retirement, Nick travels the world looking for birds, often as a member of the Rare Bird Club, and he was one of the international guests on the Flock to Marion voyage in 2022.

In 2020, Nick along with his wife, Jane, began offering generous support to BirdLife South Africa's projects, particularly the Secretarybird Project and the Avitourism Project. Nick and Jane always show a keen interest in the work being done in both projects, and often offers salient advice during donor feedback meetings.

Nick donated significant funding for the purchase and renovation of Isdell House, BirdLife South Africa's head office in Johannesburg.

Nick is a role model for birders and professionals looking to give back to birds and conservation, and is a very worth recipient of an Owl Award.

OWLET AWARD

Jandre Verster

Jandr  Verster is one of our country's top up-and-coming young birders and bird photographers. He only began birding in 2017 but has in the subsequent short time established himself as one of the most knowledgeable and active birders in Gauteng. Jandr  matriculated in 2022 and has since launched his own bird guide business, specialising in guiding in the wider Gauteng area, for which he has already personally listed 440 species. Jandr  is one of the local experts for the Zaagkuilsdrift and Kgomo-Kgomo birding site and has recorded and photographed some wonderful and unexpected species for this area and across South Africa.

In 2022, Jandr  joined the Ndebele Nightjars team for Birding Big Day and joined a very exclusive club of birders that have recorded over 300 species in 24 hours within South Africa.

Jandr  is very active on social media, often posting his photographs with informative captions and thereby raising awareness and enthusiasm for birds and birding in South Africa. Jandr 's photographic skills and social media presence have resulted in him being awarded brand ambassadorships with both The Birding Life and the Firefinch App.

In 2023, Jandr  assisted with the inaugural BirdLife South Africa Photography Competition by doing the initial sorting of over 3000 entries. Jandr 's excellent eye helped to significantly reduce the time needed from BirdLife South Africa staff and our professional judges.

On the famous Flock to Marion voyage in 2022, Jandr  volunteered himself to step in as an assistant bird guide when members of the guiding team took ill and were unavailable.

This award would be fitting recognition of Jandr 's contribution to the birding community as well as his growing relationship with BirdLife South Africa and his willingness to support bird conservation through our organization. He is one of the country's top prospects, and we hope that he will continue to support BirdLife South Africa going forward.