

BirdLife South Africa

Owl Awards 2024

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Everard Read Gallery, CIRCA



Owl Awards

Recipients' Citation

1. Mpumalanga Tourism and Parks Agency

The Mpumalanga Tourism and Parks Agency (MTPA) manages 15 protected areas across the province and focuses on responsible tourism, nature conservation and sustainable resource use for the benefit of the public. The agency recognises the crucial role of biodiversity information in guiding sustainable development and conservation decisions. To this end, the MTPA has developed spatial databases to identify and manage priority areas.

The MTPA is charged with preserving and protecting all flora and fauna in the province, including threatened species. This is done by preventing habitat loss, environmental degradation and landscape fragmentation. One way in which the MTPA ensures the continued protection of biodiversity is by entering into stewardship agreements with private and communal landowners. These stewardship opportunities allow for the expansion of protected environments for the benefit of species and their habitats.

The MTPA played a key role in declaring Middelpunt as a nature reserve and as a Ramsar site. This wetland is the only confirmed breeding site of the Critically Endangered White-winged Flufftail in South Africa. The agency helped develop the management plan and continues to support the management authority in the management and protection of the reserve.

To safeguard habitats for bird conservation, the MTPA has worked with other parties, including BirdLife South Africa, to establish and expand the Greater Lakenvlei Protected Environment in the Steenkampsberg. Several other protected areas are earmarked for future declarations along this mountain range.

MTPA staff also conduct surveys of the Critically Endangered Blue Swallow and clear historical breeding burrows annually in the hopes that the species will once again breed in Mpumalang.

In addition to working diligently towards environmental management and protection, MTPA staff are approachable and always ready to assist BirdLife South Africa with advice and information.

2. Anthony Paton

Anthony Paton holds a BA in Fine Arts, a higher education diploma (in Art and isiZulu) and a Master's degree in Tourism (all from the University of the Witwatersrand), and a diploma in Game Ranging from Allenby College.

As an enthusiastic citizen scientist for the Second Southern African Bird Atlas Project (SABAP2), he decided, in keeping with his degree in fine arts, to submit atlasing information in a way that has created a personal 'Long-tailed Pentad Bird' on the landscape. The 'Bird' is 300 kilometres long, with its head in Sun City, north-west of Johannesburg, and its tail ending close to the Vaal Dam on the Gauteng–Free State border. The bird covers 512 pentads. He coloured the 'Bird' using the system of colour changes which are triggered by successive atlas checklists. This project required 1024 checklists, a massive undertaking. Although the project was completed several years ago, Anthony has continued to submit atlasing data.

A talented wordsmith, Anthony speaks English, Afrikaans, Setswana and isiZulu, which he also teaches. He enjoys the etymology of South African bird names, and he recently put his language skills to good use by assisting the South African Names for South African Birds working group (SANSAB) by producing a list of bird names in traditional South African languages.

Anthony freelances as an expert bird guide in Johannesburg, Pretoria, Cape Town and the Kruger National Park, where he is able to utilise his phenomenal knowledge of bird calls.

He is a sought-after speaker and delivers illustrated talks enhanced by his own attractive photographs. Bird club members enjoy his entertaining lectures, which he characteristically presents in a thought-provoking manner, all the essence of a good teacher.

Anthony is a deserving recipient of an Owl Award for his scientific contributions and for teaching and encouraging amateur birders.

3. Jim Rankin

Jim Rankin is a proud supporter of the Mouse-Free Marion (MFM) Project and is one of the project's earliest donors, having sponsored a hectare of Marion Island at Flock at Sea Again! 2017 in the then newly launched MFM Sponsor-a-Hectare initiative. He has championed the MFM Project in both his personal capacity and through his work with the Rotary Clubs of South Africa.

As secretary of the Rotary Club of Knights Pendragon in Gauteng's East Rand, Jim has orchestrated the club sponsoring 100 hectares of Marion Island. Through the club, he has advocated for the MFM Project by inviting its staff to present talks at Rotary clubs and conferences.

In addition to his donations through the Rotary Club, Jim has facilitated contributions through his company AGFACTS, which specialises in agricultural machinery data reporting.

As a much-appreciated MFM Project supporter and advocate, Jim is recognised for the exceptional work he has done in creating awareness about the project and the critical need to restore Marion Island for its seabirds.

4. John Glendinning

John Glendinning has been a BirdLife South Africa supporter for several years. Recently his involvement has included supporting the Wetland and White-winged Flufftail Conservation Project and serving as a trustee of the Middelpunt Wetland Trust.

John has generously offered his specialised knowledge and skills in geochemistry to better understand the threats to wetlands that support the Critically Endangered White-winged Flufftail. He has arranged funding for water-quality tests to assess wetland health and eDNA sampling to explore new ways of finding the flufftails. Through John's involvement, Jones & Wagener, a specialist firm of consulting engineers and scientists, has supported the Middelpunt Wetland Trust and White-winged Flufftail conservation for the past three years.

An enthusiastic twitcher, John is one of South Africa's top birders. He was the first in the country to reach the 800 species mark in the South African Listers' Club. His South African bird list stands at 802 and his southern African life list at 921, currently the fourth highest ranking in the region.

John's passion for birds extends beyond birding as he makes good use of his available resources and knowledge to help conserve them.

5. Francois van der Merwe

Francois van der Merwe, a farmer and keen naturalist from Calvinia in the Northern Cape, epitomises what it means to be a true conservationist.

From knowing where to locate the uncommon Black-eared Sparrow-Lark to describing Lesser Flamingos' nocturnal food provisioning of their nestlings in the Northern Cape, Francois is constantly aware of events taking place around him in the natural world.

It is also worth revealing that he has an enviably comprehensive ornithological book collection, rivalling that housed at the Niven Library at the University of Cape Town!

Over the past two years, Francois has generously donated to BirdLife South Africa's Secretarybird Conservation Project. This enabled the project to purchase a research vehicle in 2023 and to continue its fieldwork activities in 2024. He has also assisted the project and PhD candidate Wesley Gush with identifying Secretarybird nests in his region. These nests are currently being monitored as part of a broad study investigating the impacts of a warming climate on the species' breeding behaviour and the movement and survival of these Endangered birds. In addition, he engages with neighbouring farmers and is hands-on in the field during ringing events and in fitting tracking devices onto nestlings.

Francois is a BirdLife South Africa Golden Bird Patron, a group of philanthropists who annually donate generously to BirdLife South Africa.

Without committed individuals such as Francois, the conservation efforts focused on endangered bird species would unquestionably be far less successful.

6. South African Wind Energy Association

BirdLife South Africa supports an environmentally and socially just transition to renewable energy. However, it is necessary to acknowledge that poorly planned and managed wind farms can pose significant threats to nature, including some of our most threatened birds.

It may seem counterintuitive to recognise a wind-energy association for its contribution to bird conservation, but the South African Wind Energy Association (SAWEA) stands out in this regard. SAWEA acknowledges the industry's environmental challenges and proactively engages with stakeholders to better understand, avoid and mitigate the impacts of wind-energy projects.

In 2012, just as the industry was set to boom, SAWEA's endorsement of the Endangered Wildlife Trust and BirdLife South Africa's Best Practice Guidelines for impact assessment and monitoring at wind-energy facilities was pivotal. This endorsement improved the standard of avifaunal specialist studies and encouraged wind farms to monitor and report their infrastructures' impacts on birds, enabling BirdLife South Africa to quickly learn from the first operational wind farms in the country. As a result, we are continually revising recommendations to minimise adverse effects on birds and biodiversity.

SAWEA has also amplified nature's voice at its annual WINDABA conferences. BirdLife South Africa, the South African Bat Assessment Advisory Panel and the Department of Forestry, Fisheries and the Environment have been invited to speak at these events almost every year since 2012. SAWEA's voluntary working groups and steering committees have facilitated the flow of information to and from their members, making them constructive participants at BirdLife South Africa's annual Birds and Renewable Energy Forums.

Recently BirdLife South Africa and SAWEA have worked in concert to promote the testing of blade patterning as a mitigation strategy against bird collisions. Together, they have developed resources and guidelines to further reduce these impacts.

While SAWEA's main objective is to promote the wind-energy sector in South Africa, BirdLife South Africa's mission is to conserve birds and their habitats. Naturally, there have been points of conflict. Nonetheless, thanks to SAWEA's commitment to work collaboratively with BirdLife South Africa, its promotion of best environmental practices and encouragement of information sharing among members, SAWEA has helped set the wind-energy industry on a more nature-friendly path, not only in South Africa but across the continent.

Earlier this year SAWEA and BirdLife South Africa signed a Memorandum of Association to facilitate further cooperation.

SAWEA is a worthy recipient of an Owl Award for its commitment to bird conservation, which has prevented numerous bird fatalities that could have resulted from poorly placed wind-energy developments. BirdLife South Africa is grateful for its relationship with SAWEA and we look forward to many more years of positive partnership.

7. Maureen Dixon

Maureen Dixon is a keen birder with a love of the natural world.

Together with her late husband Tony and a group of equally keen birding friends, Maureen has enjoyed many intrepid birding trips, her preference being for birding in Africa. Maureen and Tony were dedicated Golden Bird Patrons of BirdLife South Africa for 12 consecutive years. Now, on her own, she has continued that support and remains a passionate promoter of our organisation.

Having time on her hands after closing her art gallery in Mount Edgecombe in KwaZulu-Natal, Maureen offered to fundraise for BirdLife South Africa in the Durban area. Beginning in late 2023, in only six months she has successfully recruited new BirdLife South Africa members, Conservation League Donors and four Golden Bird Patrons. Her purpose is to foster a deep sense of connection and commitment to bird conservation among the birdwatching community.

In addition, after the demise of the Post Office resulted in difficulties in getting *African Birdlife* magazine to our members, Maureen now acts as a hub in her area, ensuring the distribution of copies of the magazine every two months. In a very short space of time she has become a valuable BirdLife South Africa representative in Durban and we are most grateful for her support.

8. Pierre Retief

Pierre Retief is an engineer, a teacher and lover of wild places, and islands in particular. While working in Antarctica as a radar engineer, he met Tegan Carpenter-Kling (a former employee of BirdLife South Africa) and was fascinated by a new project that BirdLife South Africa's coastal seabird team was starting.

They wanted to build a system that would passively weigh African Penguins as they left and returned to their colonies and would thus enable the team to monitor in near-real time how much food the birds were able to find. What was even more intriguing was that a lot of these systems were going to be installed on islands around the coast of South Africa. On his return to South Africa, Pierre jumped at the opportunity to work with the team and he has been instrumental in designing, building and calibrating four Automated Penguin Monitoring Systems.

Pierre has been exceptionally generous with his time and knowledge. Even after his contract ended in mid-2023, he has continued to voluntarily support and guide the members of the BirdLife South Africa team in this technically challenging project. One of his favourite sayings is 'my work comes with a lifetime guarantee' and he has certainly demonstrated this.

Despite recently emigrating to the Netherlands to start a new job at Delft University, Pierre never hesitates to answer calls for help and is always ready to offer advice when it's needed. He has spent countless late nights and weekends working on this project and it would not be nearly as successful if it weren't for him.

This Owl Award is the perfect opportunity to acknowledge Pierre for his hard work and dedication to study and conserve the African Penguin.

9. Jessica Briner

Avian veterinary specialist Dr Jessica Briner of Briner Veterinary Services is passionate about bird conservation.

During the past five years, she has given freely of her time and offered her considerable skills to several projects at both BirdLife South Africa and the Endangered Wildlife Trust. She has assisted with research permit and ethical clearance applications, and with organising monitoring equipment to observe the Critically Endangered White-winged Flufftail, collecting variables from wetlands, delineating wildlife-friendly fencing and camera-monitoring deployments and attempted captures of waterbirds.

Jess is the veterinary supervisor for Dr Kyle Lloyd of BirdLife South Africa's Wetland and White-winged Flufftail Conservation Project, overseeing his training and sampling of birds, and helping with developing ways to track the flufftails.

She was instrumental in assisting BirdLife South Africa's Raptor and Large Terrestrial Bird Conservation Project with the first-ever deployment of GPS tracking devices and with obtaining blood samples from the Critically Endangered Southern Banded Snake Eagle.

During the past three years she has assisted the Endangered Wildlife Trust's Birds of Prey Programme, giving specialist input on dealing with the catastrophic impacts of wildlife poisoning on birds of prey, and vultures in particular. Her advice on improving treatment protocols has guided the rehabilitation process and assisting with emergency veterinary care at mass poisoning events. This has resulted in the survival of nearly all birds affected by organophosphate and carbamate poisonings during the past 18 months.

In addition, she has been exceptionally generous in sharing her knowledge with other veterinarians and rehabilitation centres. She has trained veterinarians in South Africa, Mozambique and Botswana and this has helped establish a network of veterinarians who can handle wildlife poisoning events effectively. Jess has assisted with veterinary sampling for an ongoing project examining diseases in vultures.

Patient and willing to go the extra mile, she ensures that all animals in her care are treated with respect and handled safely with minimal negative impact on them. She has had an immeasurable influence not only on the animals she has helped save but also on the people who have worked with her.

BirdLife South Africa is grateful to Dr Briner for her support and generosity.

Owlet Award

Zoë Lunau-Johns

Zoë Lunau-Johns is passionate about birds and birding.

Now 17, she has been fully involved in the activities of the Cape Bird Club (CBC) for the past four years and has attended many outings and bird counts. Her contributions through identifying, photographing and logging birds have earned her the respect of other members. This year she has confidently led or co-led two successful outings, which is noteworthy at her age.

In 2021, Zoë was the only active teenage member of the CBC. By showing that it was an enjoyable and exciting thing to do, she pioneered the way for other young birders to join outings. On the excursions for CBC juniors, she encourages new members to become more actively involved and helps them learn the basics of bird identification.

In her natural and engaging way, she plays an important mentoring role, assisting with the use of apps such as eBird and BirdLasser by junior members. She has also been an administrator on the CBC Junior WhatsApp group, which has grown to more than 60 members. She frequently helps with bird identification and is often the first to congratulate a beginner birder on their photograph or sighting.

In the CBC's primary schools programme, Zoë regularly joins outings to local birding venues. The children love having her there, as she is young and her enthusiasm is infectious.

A prolific atlaser, Zoë submitted many cards during the Birding Big Year in Cape Town in 2023. Her motivation and perseverance shown throughout the Big Year, particularly in terms of diligence in accurately logging bird sightings, set an example for other junior birders, inspiring them to get out into the field more frequently and make contributions to citizen science.

She participated in Birding Big Day from 2020 to 2023, with her team recording 189 species in Cape Town in 2023.

Zoë actively assists the local SABAP2 vetters and eBird reviewing teams. She has been incredibly conscientious in this role and has made major contributions in improving the quality of eBird data in the Western Cape. She was recently appointed as a junior member of the SABAP2 National Atlas Committee. Her tireless efforts are not for any personal gain but rather because of her dedication to the integrity of the scientific data. In recognition of her outstanding skills and future potential, Zoë is also a member of the Birding Africa guides team.

Her enthusiasm, commitment and dedication to the CBC and wider birding community make Zoë very worthy of our 2024 Owlet Award.

Eagle-Owl Awards

1. Peter Nelson

Peter Nelson has formal qualifications in conservation and conservation education and has used both for the benefit of the environment. He joined the Transvaal Provincial Administration's Conservation Division in 1986, where he worked as a District Officer and Reserve Manager in the then Eastern Transvaal.

He joined Eskom in 1990 and was stationed at Koeberg Power Station in the Western Cape, where he was tasked with resolving the land usage of the property. Realising its potential, Peter recommended and subsequently managed the process of having the property declared as a nature reserve.

From there, Peter was assigned to Megawatt Park in Johannesburg, where he developed the Environmental Management System, applicable to all power station properties and often using birds as indicators.

In those days, 'conservation' was not a popular term in industry and Peter was an ardent protagonist in having the concept accepted and valued within Eskom. Once again, Peter's passion for birds was used extensively for promoting and justifying the need for incorporating conservation principles in planning and managing projects and activities within the company.

Peter was responsible for establishing the Birds and Powerlines programme with the Endangered Wildlife Trust, a project still in place and working at mitigating bird and powerline collisions and electrocutions.

He acted as the interface between Eskom and BirdLife South Africa in 1997, succeeding in securing Eskom funding for the *Eskom Red Data Book of Birds of South Africa, Lesotho and Swaziland*.

Peter was involved with the environmental aspects of the Ingula Pumped Storage Scheme in KwaZulu-Natal from the effective implementation of the scheme in 2000. He and his family relocated to Ladysmith in 2006 for him to take up the full-time post of Environmental Manager at Ingula. It is in this function that Peter is best known from a BirdLife South Africa perspective.

The environmental success of Ingula has been, and remains, dependent upon a balance between 'industry' and 'conservation'. Peter has provided a supportive and mentorship role for BirdLife South Africa's Ingula Project Managers over the years, namely Neil Smith, David Maphisa, Robin Colyn and currently Carina Pienaar.

Peter played an essential role in having Ingula declared as a nature reserve and a Ramsar site, both achievements a source of great pride to all involved.

Ladysmith Birders, an active and growing club, exists because in 2015 Peter and a friend identified an opportunity to share and encourage birdwatching in the town. Peter has served as Chairman and membership driver since the club's inception.

In summary, Peter has devoted his life to conservation, with birds as the constant and compelling motivating factor. Being the energetic force behind the declaration of two nature reserves and a Ramsar site is a significant triumph.

Peter retired from Ingula as Senior Consultant, Environmental Management at the end of July. He has already embarked on a birding-heavy retirement!

2. Ingrid Weiersbye-Porter

Ingrid Weiersbye-Porter is an exceptional bird artist and illustrator and has made an immense contribution to birdwatching over 45 years, in particular to publications about southern African birds.

Born in London, Ingrid was educated in Zimbabwe before she settled in KwaZulu-Natal in 1980. Now based in Hilton, she travels extensively to obtain reference material and to observe birds in their natural habitats. Her powers of field observation are acute and her artistic skills, research, drive for accuracy and her productivity ensure a level of excellence in her work.

In the field, she studies and photographs birds and she has assembled a vast library of photographic references of birds of southern Africa to ensure that her illustrations are correct in terms of proportion, morphometrics, colours and attitude.

Ingrid meticulously researches each species to be illustrated by studying the literature, photographs and museum skins. She is renowned for portraying behaviours such as territoriality, mating, aggression, threat display, flight and habitat. Her remarkable ability to capture the jizz of a bird in her paintings and illustrations strikes a chord in all birders who view her work.

The challenge for bird field guide or handbook artists is that these publications must help anyone interested in birds to correctly identify a species, whether in the field or in the hand. To achieve this, the illustrations must accurately portray the species, taking into account its sex, age and plumage stage or variation. In addition, as many species are seen in flight, both dorsal and ventral views must be shown. Ingrid's bird images are not presented in a regimented way but show the creature's key features in characteristic, natural postures.

Given the many threats facing the avifauna of southern Africa, it is crucial for observers to be able to accurately identify bird species, particularly those that are under threat, in order to assist in effective monitoring and conservation.

Ingrid has contributed hundreds of detailed illustrations of the bird species of the southern African region. They have been used in a number of leading bird books published since 2005, most notably the *Roberts* range of field guides, among them

- *Roberts Birds of Southern Africa* (VII edition)
- *Roberts Bird Guide: A comprehensive field guide to over 950 bird species in southern Africa*
- *Roberts Bird Guide: Kruger National Park and adjacent Lowveld*
- *Roberts Geographic Variation of Southern African Birds*.

She illustrated *Birds of Botswana*, a super book authored by her and Peter Hancock.

The original artwork for the second edition of the *Roberts Bird Guide* was made available for the public to buy. Ingrid has managed this initiative, in which a donation of 25 per cent from every sale accrues to BirdLife South Africa; to date, the amount donated exceeds R145 000.

She has also produced 'Bird of the Year' illustrations for promotional products for BirdLife South Africa and fundraising posters for bird species conservation or awareness.

As an acclaimed bird and wildlife artist, Ingrid has held 20 solo exhibitions in South Africa and overseas. She exhibited for seven years in the United Kingdom, including at the annual Society of Wildlife Artists in London and the British Birdfair, where she received the award for best art exhibit in two consecutive years.

South African birders are truly privileged to have an artist of Ingrid's calibre providing the artwork for many of our field guides.

This Eagle-Owl Award is richly deserved for her contribution over the past 45 years.