

Bird Clubs South Africa style

Title **To view the original PDF of this World Birdwatch article**, [click here](#). BirdLife South Africa (BLSA; BirdLife Partner) has a membership of around 6,700, of whom more than 5,000 are also members of Bird Clubs. The network of more than 40 Bird Club/branches and affiliates provides a great resource, which allows BLSA to achieve much more than it could through its dedicated staff alone. Because of its remarkable diversity of habitats, South Africa hosts about 850 bird species, with at least 600 terrestrial species breeding within the country. But South Africa is the most economically developed country in the Afrotropics, and its biological resources have been severely impacted by humans. In response, some 741 publicly-owned Protected Areas have been established, covering 74,956 km². Many of these are also recognised as Important Bird Areas (IBA) by BirdLife. There are currently 102 IBAs in South Africa, covering over 100,000 km²—an equivalent to 8.3% of the land area. Although many Bird Clubs are long established (some for 60 years or more), the movement to align themselves with BirdLife South Africa's mission is relatively recent, and is gaining momentum. Bird Clubs which affiliate to BLSA receive support for membership, conservation, fundraising, public relations and much more. 'We are affiliated with BirdLife South Africa because the infrastructure to manage our members is a big advantage', says Philip Calinkos, chair of BirdLife Northern Gauteng. Affiliated clubs get access to expert staff who can offer support and advice, keep them informed about matters affecting bird conservation, and help them participate in birding events. A number of clubs speak of the importance of being part of a larger network within South Africa, and also being part of the BirdLife International family. 'Being part of the bigger picture of conservation in South Africa is very important, and being affiliated to BirdLife South Africa means that we are part of the main body, receiving advice on issues bigger than what the branch can handle', says Trish Strachan of BirdLife Sisonke. 'We get strength in numbers, international clout, and opportunities to work towards a common goal', adds Gisela Ortner of Witwatersrand Bird Club. The Bird Clubs are divided into eight regions, but the distances separating them can still be a problem. A forum can help with communication, and coordination of projects between the clubs. At present three of the regions have fora, which meet to share ideas and discuss joint issues and projects. 'Fora have greatly improved communication between Bird Clubs and BirdLife South Africa by pulling in smaller branches and helping to give them an extra voice', says André Marx of BirdLife Northern Gauteng. 'They can then approach council with issues and problems. It's been a big success. Before the fora they didn't have a voice because they are so geographically isolated'. Clubs hold regular—usually monthly—meetings for their members, which often involve an invited guest delivering a bird related talk. BLSA aims to visit each club to give a talk each year. 'It's very useful. After talks we've had legacy enquiries and recruited many new members', says Mark Anderson, BLSA's Executive Director. Proactive conservation of IBAs is becoming an increasing priority for the Bird Clubs. For example, the KwaZulu-Natal Forum meets every six months, for two days per meeting. The first day is focused on conservation and monitoring activities within the 26 IBAs covered by the six clubs in the Forum. The second day is for all other business. 'Clubs have always done monitoring at

IBAs, but now have a change in thinking and now actively want to help conserve them," says Sadie Halbhuber, BLSA's Events Division Manager. "They are working on how to align better with BLSA's IBA conservation work." The clubs' coordinated monitoring provides valuable data for identifying IBAs and setting conservation priorities. BLSA recently ran a series of workshops with Bird Clubs, to train their members in IBA assessments. To date Bird Clubs have completed 67 out of 103 IBA assessments, which have already been loaded into BirdLife's World Biodiversity Database. The main coordinated avifaunal surveys in South Africa include the Southern African Bird Atlas 2 (SABAP2), a five year project with 580 registered observers, of whom around 400 are members of Bird Clubs. SABAP2 involves recording the presence or absence of species within a grid cell (pentad). Many clubs have SABAP2 coordinators and run workshops on how to undertake surveys. This has been enormously successful, and in just three years over 1,000,000 records have been submitted and 30% of pentads have been covered. About 60% of clubs also undertake Coordinated Avifaunal Road-counts (CARs) to monitor large and conspicuous birds from vehicles covering fixed routes. The first CAR in 1993 was a joint project by Cape Bird Club and the Animal Demography Unit (ADU) of the University of Cape Town, to monitor the populations of Blue Crane *Anthropoides paradiseus* [Vulnerable] and Denham's Bustard *Neotis denhami*. CARs now monitor over 20 species of large terrestrial birds—cranes, bustards, korhaans, storks, Secretary bird *Sagittarius serpentarius* and Southern Bald Ibis *Geronticus calvus* [Vulnerable]—along 360 fixed routes covering over 19,000 km. CAR has thrived on the enthusiastic participation of Bird Club volunteers and other members of the public. Every six months, over 750 people travel along bumpy country roads, making this one of the largest birder-participation projects in Africa. Avitourism (birding tourism) is also proving to be one of BLSA's most powerful conservation tools, and two Birding Routes alone have generated an estimated US\$6.4 million annually for local people. Birding Routes provide tourists with suggested itineraries, trained community bird guides and birder-friendly accommodation. Bird Clubs are involved in several aspects of Birding Route development, one of the most important being mentoring bird guides to improve their identification and communication skills. "We have trained five local people as bird guides, and play an active part in promoting tourism with a focus on birding in our community," says Eugene Steyn, Chairman of BLSA's Plettenberg Bay branch. "Our current initiative, to establish a Birding Route for the Garden Route, arose from contacts with other BLSA branches." Bird Clubs are also involved in a huge number of diverse conservation and education projects in and around IBAs. These include setting up school clubs (Eco-schools), managing IBAs, fighting threats, helping to declare Protected Areas, and increasing the size of existing Protected Areas. In many of these activities the clubs have been greatly strengthened by membership of the network, and the support of BLSA. "We're working with the Wits [Witwatersrand] Bird Club at Elandsvlei wetland, which belongs to 3-4 farmers and is a natural dam important for migrant waders," says BirdLife Northern Gauteng's Philip Calinkos. "We're trying to get the landowners to conserve the area, and have received support and advice from BLSA." In return, the clubs can relieve BLSA's hard-pressed staff of some of their burdens, and help them with funding. "We organised the 2009 AGM at Wakkerstroom for all the Bird Clubs in South Africa, and asked other Bird Clubs in the Gauteng Forum to help," says Lance Robinson, Chairman of Witwatersrand Bird Club. "Furthermore, we're proud of the collaborative effort in addressing the mining issues in the Wakkerstroom area, and the collaborative effort in providing money, based on membership levels, toward the new BirdLife South Africa membership data system." With all this action on the ground, the future for birds and IBAs in South Africa is looking bright.