



# KORSMAN CONSERVANCY NEWSLETTER

## DECEMBER 2017

Dear Members,

### **Bar-tailed Godwit**

Korsman found itself in the papers in October, thanks to a nondescript migratory bird that attracted birdwatchers from Gauteng and neighbouring provinces. The bird should have gone to the coast and is hardly ever seen inland, hence the excitement.

During the five weeks it stopped over, we directed visitors with searching looks on their faces to where they could see it – usually at the Shannon Rd berm, our prime viewing spot. It both showed off and taunted visitors by its habit of keeping its head mostly under water which had the effect of making itself invisible to twitchers even when directly in front of them. Is there something to that ostrich story after all?



Photo by Jan de Beer. See his humorous and fascinating Saturday Star article at the end of the newsletter.

### **Student research: Spur-winged Geese**



Over several sessions in June, BSc student Tahnia Lombard observed Spur-winged Goose behaviour at Korsman. She reported that they have distinct personalities but are also copy-cats – if one standing Spur-wing flaps its wings, then other standing birds flap theirs too. And although they are not aggressive, when a bird walks up to one, the other frequently moves away. Duck breath?



We had always thought that Spur-wings fed on land only, but she saw them feeding in water on average as much as on the land. Apart from that, it's pretty much a Spur-winged Goose's life: their main activity is sleeping.

### **Earth Organisation project with Kid's Haven**

Sayomi Takasi, a scientist who runs the Johannesburg chapter of the Lawrence Anthony Earth Organisation, brought a group of top achieving children from Benoni orphanage Kid's Haven to do practical fieldwork looking for aquatic invertebrates.



Two weeks later, they gave back by conducting a litter pickup. Member Linda Stracker kindly assisted at both events.



## Litter Pickup 12 November

After the rains, more litter had washed in via the storm water so 14 volunteers joined our Spring litter pickup and cleared an unprecedented 27 bags of litter out of the Sanctuary.

As it is unsustainable to just carry on picking up vast amounts that wash in constantly, I have discussed with Mankodi Hlongwane, EMM's Biodiversity and Conservation Specialist to request grates over the storm water intakes from the railway line.



If I'd briefed the volunteers in advance on advanced litter disposal techniques, Dave Barry's find of false teeth could have found a home on another new Korsman public service project - Lost and Found boards, created by Tracy Boggis.



*Dave Barry, winner of the Weirdest Find of the Day Award for this set of choppers*

## Grassland wildflower regeneration

Our Botanical expert member, Calvin Becker, has donated indigenous trees and helped with a project to reintroduce wild flower species. Many grassland wildflowers died out from overgrazing by the introduced game between the 1950s until 1996 when they were finally removed.

Plant pathologist Calvin's indigenous species knowledge and green fingers have already seen Helichrysum and Pelargonium plants flowering.

Calvin now applies his talents as a landscaper: 0835554900 [Plantcentric](#)



## Water testing

Member Dieter Holle, an indigenous fish fundi, has been testing Korsman's water quality monthly and declared it very good.

Water supports life, and indeed there is plenty of it in there. We took an informal sample containing creatures which Dieter examined under his microscope. He found things we couldn't see with the naked eye as well as captured their inner workings.



We research freshwater invertebrates further this season, planning to hold an event with invited entomologists.

Photos: Top right – unidentified, top left – Water boatman (Corixidae) bottom left Water flea (Daphnia) and unidentified creature.

### **Goliath Heron Breeding**

In September's newsletter, I reported that our Goliaths had produced two chicks, and both have survived. The two juveniles were 16 weeks old on 2 December.

Because the sedge nest was visible from outside the fence, we saw the development of the chicks and feeding techniques.



*Aged five weeks. Photo by Jan de Beer*



*14 weeks old. The juvenile lacks the reddish-brown shoulder patches and belly of the adult*

A couple of hours after fishing, when the parent's catch has digested somewhat, it approaches the nest and the youngsters start flapping wildly to get more attention. The adult regurgitates the partially-digested fish and 'chomps' off bits with its bill. After feeding, the adult re-swallows the remainder of the fish.

The juveniles are quite independent now, but still act like starving teenagers wanting food when they see a parent approaching. We saw them being fed at 16 weeks.

### **Member's Bird and Nature Walk 3 December**

Our favourite sightings on the walk were a group of ten Avocets and a mixed flock of swallows and swifts swooping over the grassland catching flying insects.

Cassandra Barbosa captured these stunning photos of White-throated swallows and an Avocet.



### **Where are the flamingos?**

The bad news is the flamingos are scarce this year. Those that have stopped over are mostly groups of black and white juveniles.

The good news is that the colourful adults are probably all at Kamfer's Dam in Kimberley, breeding for the first time in years. Kamfer's Dam has an artificial breeding island but has suffered from sewerage discharges into the dam which are now resolved. Reports are that tens of thousands of flamingos are presently there. Let's hope they visit us later this season with their new families.



The Bar-tailed Godwit squawks at a juvenile Greater Flamingo. Photo by Eugene Liebenberg

# Benoni's new star flew in from Russia with love

JAN DE BEER

Saturday Star 28 October 2017

The folks at Benoni sports pubs just love the city's birds. Castles and Amstels were raised when Charlize won her Oscar. Glasses of the city's pride, Campari, were delicately clinked when Charlene became a princess. She was royalty after all.

Now another exceptional bird has chosen my much-mocked East Rand home city as just the place to land and savour the local cuisine for a while. And the passionate pilgrimage from far and wide to just catch a distant glimpse of the city's new talent is in full swing.

So let's meet Benoni's new treasure. It hasn't got a name that would look great in lights. Instead it's called a bar-tailed godwit, and it landed totally out of the blue, in this city of mine dumps on October 7.

It's of the feathered variety, as you might have guessed by now, and really nothing special to look at: a mottled brown, black and grey wading bird; about the size of an elongated chicken, with a long slightly upturned bill. It lives probably around 11 500kms away in chilly Siberia. Then, when the Arctic winter gets really freezing, it flies south to sunny Australasian and African coastlines.

Here's the punch-line: it flies all those thousands of kilometres - non-stop. Repeat: non-stop.

The bird just takes off, flies on and on, almost from Pole to Pole. No other living creature can do that. No other bird can even do half that distance, non-stop. It's like a human being walking, day after day, for one entire week at a constant 50kms per hour, without a single pit stop or snooze.

Around the start of October, flocks totalling about 70 000 bar-tailed godwits take to the air in the Arctic autumn and just fly south. No food breaks. No stops for water. No sleep. No pausing. As land birds, they cannot fish or rest on the sea, so for a week or more they just flap wings, somehow switching off half of their brain to conserve energy and losing lots of body weight, until landing. The distances have been proved by satellite tracking but still dumbfounds even the most learned biologists globally.

Around the beginning of October, Benoni's new star must have taken off with its flock and started a marathon flight, heading for a warmer coastline either in Africa or Australasia. But something went wrong - perhaps that terrifying tornado that blew into Durban blew a flock's stragglers or young ones astray - and next thing it landed inland in the lovely pan at Benoni's Korsman Bird Sanctuary.

The word got around and the reserve - right in the middle of the affluent, conservative suburb of Lakefield - has never experienced an October like this.

Every weekend brings high-tech telescopes, scary long telephoto lenses, lofty tripods, heavy binoculars, and glazed eyes staring at the pan. Tormented twitchers within reach of a "lifetimer" can become obsessed. Unwitting suburban residents, on their morning walks, are being stopped by strange cars, with drivers asking them to direct them to God - or something that sounded like that. Had Korsman become holy ground overnight? Had Trump pushed that red button? The estate agent preparing for a Showhouse Day for the Sunday the godwit groupies descended in earnest, could not stop smiling.

Meanwhile, the celebrated bar-tailed godwit appears a bit overwhelmed by sudden fame and has, following a rather unfriendly welcome from some of the pan's lapwings, decided to move to the muddy parts towards the middle of the pan and just keeps sticking its head deep into the water, snacking on aquatic creatures. Not great for photos, the birders mutter.

Just how long the bird will stay top of the bill, so to speak, at Korsman is a matter of debate. Some local ornithologists think it's stuffing itself with food before taking off for another non-stop haul to the coast. Others say that if Korsman seems to be to its liking, it might just stay the whole summer - and even come back every year, perhaps bringing some friends and family along.

Only time will tell how long Benoni will continue to host the enigmatic bar-tailed godwit and Korsman Conservancy continue to be a drawcard for the feathered faithful. But perhaps the bird is what Benoni needs right now to show some civic conservation care after condemning its historic Bunny Park residents to a Zoo menu.

**JAN DE BEER**

THE FOLKS at Benoni sports pubs just love the city's birds. Castles and Amstels were raised when Charlize won her Oscar. Glasses of the city's pride, Campari, were delicately clinked when Charlene became a princess. She was royalty after all.

Now another exceptional bird has chosen my much-mocked East Rand home city as just the place to land and savour the local cuisine for a while. And the passionate pilgrimage from far and wide to just catch a distant glimpse of the city's new talent is in full swing.

Benoni's new treasure hasn't got a name that would look great in lights. It's called a bar-tailed godwit, and it landed totally out of the blue in this city of mine dumps on October 7.

It's of the feathered variety, as you might have guessed by now, and really nothing special to look at: a mottled brown, black and grey wading bird; about the size of an elongated chicken, with a long slightly upturned bill. It lives probably around 11 500kms away in chilly Siberia. Then, when the Arctic winter gets really freezing, it flies south to sunny Australasian and African coastlines.

Here's the punch-line: it flies all those thousands of kilometres - non-stop. Repeat: non-stop.

The bird just takes off, flies on and on, almost from Pole to Pole. No other living creature can do that. No other bird can even do half that distance, non-stop. It's like a human being walking, day after day, for one entire week at a constant 50kms per hour, without a single pit stop or snooze.

Around the start of October, flocks totalling about 70 000 bar-tailed godwits take to the air in the Arctic autumn and just fly south. No food breaks. No stops for water. No sleep. No pausing. As land birds, they cannot fish or rest on the sea, so for a week or more they just flap wings, somehow switching off half of their brain to conserve energy and losing lots of body weight, until landing. The distances have been proved by satellite tracking but still dumbfounds even the most learned biologists globally.

Around the beginning of October, Benoni's new star must have taken off with its flock and started a marathon flight, heading for a warmer coastline either in Africa or Australasia. But something went wrong - perhaps that terrifying tornado that blew into Durban blew a flock's stragglers or young ones astray - and next thing it landed inland in the lovely pan at Benoni's Korsman Bird Sanctuary.

The word got around and the reserve - right in the middle of the affluent, conservative suburb of Lakefield - has never experienced an October like this.

Every weekend brings high-tech telescopes, scary long telephoto lenses, lofty tripods, heavy binoculars, and glazed eyes staring at the pan. Tormented twitchers within reach of a "lifetimer" can become obsessed. Unwitting suburban residents, on their morning walks, are being stopped by strange cars, with drivers asking them to direct them to God - or something that sounded like that. Had Korsman become holy ground overnight? Had Trump pushed that red button? The estate agent preparing for a Showhouse Day for the Sunday the godwit groupies descended in earnest, could not stop smiling.

Meanwhile, the celebrated bar-tailed godwit appears a bit overwhelmed by sudden fame and has, following a rather unfriendly welcome from some of the pan's lapwings, decided to move to the muddy parts towards the middle of the pan and just keeps sticking its head deep into the water, snacking on aquatic creatures. Not great for photos, the birders mutter.

Just how long the bird will stay top of the bill, so to speak, at Korsman is a matter of debate. Some local ornithologists think it's stuffing itself with food before taking off for another non-stop haul to the coast. Others say that if Korsman seems to be to its liking, it might just stay the whole summer - and even come back every year, perhaps bringing some friends and family along.

Only time will tell how long Benoni will continue to host the enigmatic bar-tailed godwit and Korsman Conservancy continue to be a drawcard for the feathered faithful. But perhaps the bird is what Benoni needs right now to show some civic conservation care after condemning its historic Bunny Park residents to a Zoo menu.

**It flies 11 500km non-stop, almost from Pole to Pole**