



A Grey-headed Gull hovers over some of the dozens of flamingos that often congregate to spend summers at Korsman.



The bird that flew in from Russia with love: this Bar-tailed Godwit must have flown about 11 500km, non-stop, from Siberia to land at Korsman Bird Sanctuary in Benoni.



Egyptian geese mate for life. Here's a happily married couple at the Korsman pan.



Devoted Goliath Heron parents had to do a lot of fishing to provide food for two hungry hatchlings in their Korsman nest.



The African swamp hen brings amazing colour to Korsman – until it starts digging in the mud...

Birdwatchers *flock to* Korsman

There are primarily two kinds of game-viewers in South Africa's game parks: the ones obsessed only with the Big Five, and those who will stop to savour all nature can offer – including the smallest of birds.

Well, if birds are your passion – particularly waterbirds – Benoni has a pan, right in the middle of suburbia, with birds you may never see in a lifetime of visiting game reserves in southern Africa.

It is Lakefield's Korsman Bird Sanctuary, where more than 300 bird species – some extremely rare – have been spotted. Spectacular flamingos, for a start, spend their summers at Korsman, unfazed by the pan's proximity to drab industry in Benoni's Atlas Road or the residents of The Drive, the upmarket circular street that surrounds Korsman.

In most of our big game parks, you are not going to see flamingos and would be very lucky to see the likes of Cape Shovellers, Hottentot Teals, White-faced Ducks, Spurwing Geese, even Black-headed Heron. At Korsman, these magnificent waterbirds are regularly spotted from the roadside at The Drive and raised berms provided next to the fence.

In 2017, Korsman made the South African – even international – birding fraternity sit up and take notice because of two exceptional events.

Firstly, a pair of Goliath Heron – the tallest herons in the world – decided to build their nest and produced two hatchlings in a clump of sedge visible from the roadside. Not only did observant Korsman devotees see the nest-building and accompanying elaborate courtship ritual, but for almost five months thereafter they could observe the little hatchlings grow taller and taller, tended to by devoted parents who took turns to gobble up carp so big you'd never think they could slide down their gullets to bring back as feed stock at the nest. Goliath Heron courtship rituals are undocumented by birding authorities, so very few people have ever seen the sentimental overtures between the pair that took place in Korsman.

But there was more to come to make last year special for Korsman.

In October 2017, a mottled brown, black and grey wading bird, about the size of a chicken, with a long, slightly upturned bill, arrived. Innocuous in appearance,

the Bar-tailed Godwit is a freak of nature. Nothing on earth can match its incredible long-distance flying capacity. The bird that landed at Korsman on October 7 could have flown for about a week or more from an icy Siberian winter over 11 500 kilometres away – absolutely non-stop.

Hardly ever seen inland in Africa, the Godwit spent about five weeks at Korsman, attracting excited "twitchers" from as far as Nelspruit and sparking off newspaper headlines.

But there are always surprises at Korsman: Little Stints who land also after marathon flights from the North Pole (they at least allow themselves some stopovers), and frequent visits by Marsh Sandpipers and Black Crakes that are so elusive in the wild. The pan's permanents include ibises, gulls, moorhens, swamp hens, coots, geese, spoonbills, darters, herons and egrets, to name just a few. The Korsman community also extends beyond birdlife and includes terrapins,

mongooses, bats and dozens of butterfly and spider species – plus plenty of fish and other underwater life to help feed the residents.

To preserve the pan's status as a major Gauteng tourist attraction needs dedicated caretakers led by chairperson Jane Trembath and her committee, who devote much time and rally community support to care for Korsman – from clearing up litter to removing invasive plants, ecological veld burning and calling for municipal and other help when needed.

Korsman is not only a delight for birders. The pan exudes peace and serenity. It is a place to lift the spirit and reinforce the bond that connects us with all forms of life to greater appreciate our place on earth. It makes living in Benoni worthwhile.

Visit the website www.korsmanconservancy.com for more details about the conservancy.

Text and photos by Jan de Beer