

An aerial photograph of Johannesburg, South Africa, showing a dense urban landscape with numerous high-rise buildings and residential blocks. The sky is filled with several birds in flight, including a large white crane-like bird, a duck, a black bird with a long beak, and a bird of prey. A small white bird is perched on a rooftop in the foreground. A white text box is overlaid on the left side of the image.

JOBURG'S FOR THE BIRDS

The economic hub of Africa, it's a city of highways, high-rises and shopping malls. But Johannesburg also has at least ten million trees, four different biomes, more than 400 species of birds – and thousands of twitchers. [Nick Dall](#) joins a few Jo'birders

W

hen I was a kid we used to roam the hidden corners of Soweto on our BMXes. Soweto's not all built-up, you know... There are koppies and dams and wetlands. We swam in the rivers and we hunted birds to eat. We weren't starving or anything, but boys will be boys. We shot them with catapults or we caught them in traps made from an old bicycle wheel and an onion sack.'

Raymond Rampolokeng grew up to be a top birding guide in Soweto and an internationally certified



CLOCKWISE FROM BELOW
Bird guide Raymond Rampolokeng at the Orlando Towers in Soweto; the ubiquitous hadeda and Egyptian geese; the 15m-high Artificial Nesting Platform, built in 2009, is home to one of only two pairs of nesting Verreaux's eagles in Johannesburg

cycling instructor, too. Talk about doing what you love. When we meet in the shadow of the Orlando Towers, Raymond is wearing a camo cap and a faded denim waistcoat; his square watch and stallion-buckle belt glint in the early morning sunlight. The binoculars around his neck are the only hint that he's my man.

Nowadays the garish former cooling towers are a popular venue for bungee jumping, go-karting and paintball, but when Raymond was a lighty they were unpainted and off limits: the power station was only decommissioned in 1998.

The two of us walk down to the Orlando wetland, an artificial lake once used to cool the power turbines. The guys from the local canoeing club are getting ready for a training session. Kwaito blares from a mobile phone while

teenagers tighten life jackets and practise paddling strokes. Just then, a mustard-coloured shape whizzes across the water.

'Squacco heron,' says Raymond. 'That's one of our specials.'

We walk in the general direction of the towers, skirting a reed bed and the putrid stream that feeds the wetland. Raymond tells me that after school he studied PR and got a job in the corporate world. 'We moved out to the 'burbs and started living the quiet, boring life. Birding actually found me...' He was volunteering at an environmental charity in Soweto and met some people from the Wits Bird Club, who funded his bird guide course. After that, he took a full-time job with BirdLife South Africa.

'Birding changed the way I interact with my environment, and I want it do the same for the youth,' he says. 'I'm on a mission to make birding the new hip.'

Nick Dall, Albert Froneman, Bo van der Lecq, Opener: iStock, Albert Froneman



THE EARLY BIRD...

'Fortunately you don't have to get up too early to see the eagles.'

I've been in email contact with Lance Robinson for months, but this line sticks in my mind. So when he and his wife Hanneline pick me up, it's the first thing I ask about. Apparently there are two reasons for the laziness of the Verreaux's eagle: one, it's easier for them to fly when the air has warmed up. And, two, they're an apex predator so they don't have to worry about getting up early to catch the worm.

During the week Lance does something complicated for a financial services firm in Sandton, but birds seem to occupy most of his headspace and all of his weekends. Hanneline is a bona fide scientist and a full-time employee at BirdLife South Africa, so her involvement is 24/7. She's wearing an owl T-shirt and swallow earrings. Her handbag has birds on it, too.

After very little preamble we start talking about the impact the city of Johannesburg has had on birding in the Highveld. 'All the parks and gardens have transformed a grassland

habitat into an artificial woodland,' explains Hanneline. 'Jo'burg's bird population has changed enormously in the last 50 to 100 years. Everyone notices the hadedas and the Egyptian geese. But very few people realise that the bokmakierie (bushshrike) is getting scarcer and scarcer, while woodland birds like crested barbets and African olive pigeons flourish.'

We're driving south, towards Alberton (a place better known for its rugby players than its birds) and the Artificial Nesting Platform (ANP), which was erected for a pair of Verreaux's eagles in 2009. Their previous nest was on a nearby Eskom electricity pylon only 150 metres from an extremely busy interchange, but in 2008 this nest was ransacked by humans – for *muti*, falconry or the pet trade. Verreaux's eagles are among the largest in the world, weighing up to seven kilograms, and their jet black appearance (when standing) is particularly striking.

The ANP is on Meyer's Farm, a historic property that was once painted by Pierneef but is now a stabling and gymkhana facility. We park in a dusty parking lot teeming with German SUVs and moms and daughters in matching jodhpurs. Right on cue, an enormous shadow – which could only be caused by a bird with a two-metre wingspan – careens across the red gravel. ■

TOP JHB SPOTS FOR TWITCHING

- Delta Park (in Randburg's Victory Park suburb) has a bird sanctuary and environmental centre. deltaenviro.org.za
- Northern Farm (aka Diepsloot Nature Reserve), near Lanseria Airport, is popular with birders, mountain bikers, trail runners, horse riders and dog sledders. northernfarm.co.za
- More than 220 bird species have been recorded at Walter Sisulu Botanical Garden in Roodepoort. Also to see: reptiles, small buck, jackals. sanbi.org
- The Blouboospruit runs through the Klipriviersberg Nature Reserve, near Kibler Park in the south (west of Alberton). Good for nature trails and Iron Age sites. klipriviersberg.org.za
- The 15ha Kloofendal Nature Reserve, near Roodepoort on the West Rand, is a great hiking and birding spot, and offers eco-educational weekend 'family camp-outs'. jhbcityparks.com
- The 22,000-hectare Suikerbosrand Nature Reserve on the outskirts of the city (off the R550/Alberton road) has hiking trails, picnic sites and a self-drive route. gauteng.net



We walk up an overgrown road, stopping every now and then to listen to the call of a weaver or to distinguish between two LBJs ('little brown jobs' – the phrase used by twitchers to describe ubiquitous brown birds). When we reach a grimy rag tied to a tree about 100 metres from the platform, we stop. But there's only so long you can look at a pile of sticks streaked with white excrement (the stomach acid of the eagle is so potent that it dissolves the bones of its prey). We backtrack to a better vantage point: a pile of manure tangled with creepers bearing some kind of round squash.

Lance trains his telephoto lens on the skies and Hanneline whips out her cellphone to record the sighting on BirdLasser, an app which allows citizen scientists all over South Africa to contribute to the ongoing census of species and locations. Hanneline and Lance admit to being BirdLasser addicts and they both have personal records in excess of 100 different species in a single day. It has to be said, they do spend more time tapping at their screens than even the most die-hard 16-year-old Snapchatter.

ABOVE
The specific prey of Verreaux's, or black, eagles are dassies, which make up around 90 per cent of their diet. The species was named after French naturalist Jules Verreaux, who visited southern Africa in the early 1700s

BELOW
Lance Robinson from the Wits Bird Club, in pursuit of the perfect shot at Meyer's Farm. That black speck in the distance? A Verreaux's eagle (not a crow, promise)



Every time we try to head back to the car for a cup of coffee, the eagles reappear, their massive silhouettes scything through the blue sky. They've attracted an entourage of crows, which harass the much bigger birds incessantly. We count 15 crows swarming around the eagles, like fighter jets pestering a 747. No one knows why the crows mob the eagles (Lance puts it down to their personality) but it happens all over the world to loads of different species of eagle. It's easy to get annoyed with the crows, but nature isn't always fair. Besides, the Verreaux's eagle practises 'Cainism' – the older chick kills its younger, smaller sibling when both are only a few days old.

We do finally get to have our coffee (an excellent brew sourced all the way from Masterton's in Port Elizabeth) and there is still time to check out another birding hotspot.

CITY SLICKERS

→ The previously localised hadeda ibis has expanded its South African range nearly threefold in the last 50 years. Mowed urban lawns provide the perfect foraging habitat, large alien trees are ideal for nesting, and swimming pools and ponds are an adequate substitute for wetlands.

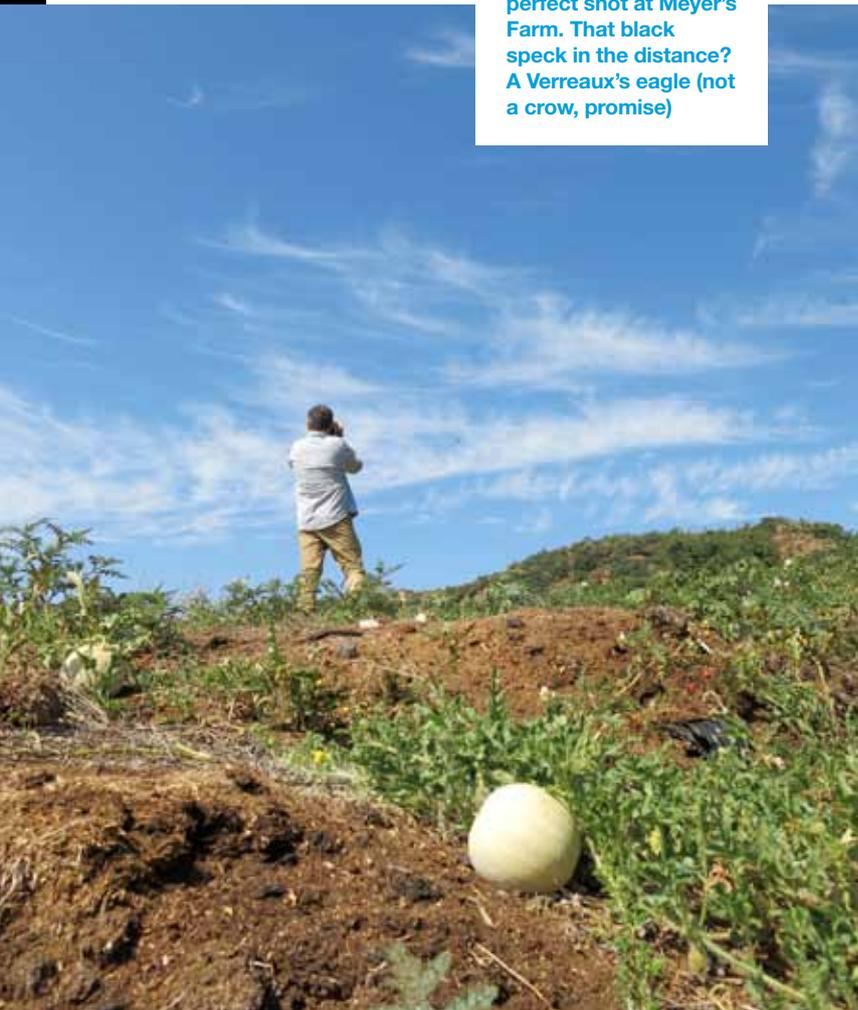
→ Marabou storks occur naturally in most of Africa but their arrival in East African cities like Nairobi and Kampala is relatively recent. These enormous scavengers are attracted to dumps and abattoirs, and although their white excrement makes them very unpopular, experts say they actually help to clean cities up.

→ Voted one of the most invasive species in the world, the common myna is found throughout Asia, but has also proved a prolific import in Australia, Madagascar and South Africa. Mynas are synonymous with Durban, but are also becoming increasingly populous in Gauteng.

It's hard to believe that the 680-hectare Klipriviersberg Nature Reserve is only ten kilometres from the centre of Jo'burg, and it's even harder to believe that entrance is absolutely gratis. It's a beautifully maintained reserve with an extensive network of hiking trails and a decent population of antelope.

We wander through the grasslands towards the river. There are butterflies everywhere: orange ones, blue ones, white ones, yellow ones. When it comes to butterflies all three of us are beginners, and we just enjoy the show while Lance snaps a few shots. At the river we pose for a selfie on a rock and watch a crab scuttling across the muddy bottom. As we walk back to the car we spot an amethyst sunbird (a jet black version of the dainty green and red birds I'm used to seeing in the Cape) and a white-winged widow bird.

When they drop me at my brother's place, Lance and Hanneline present me with a

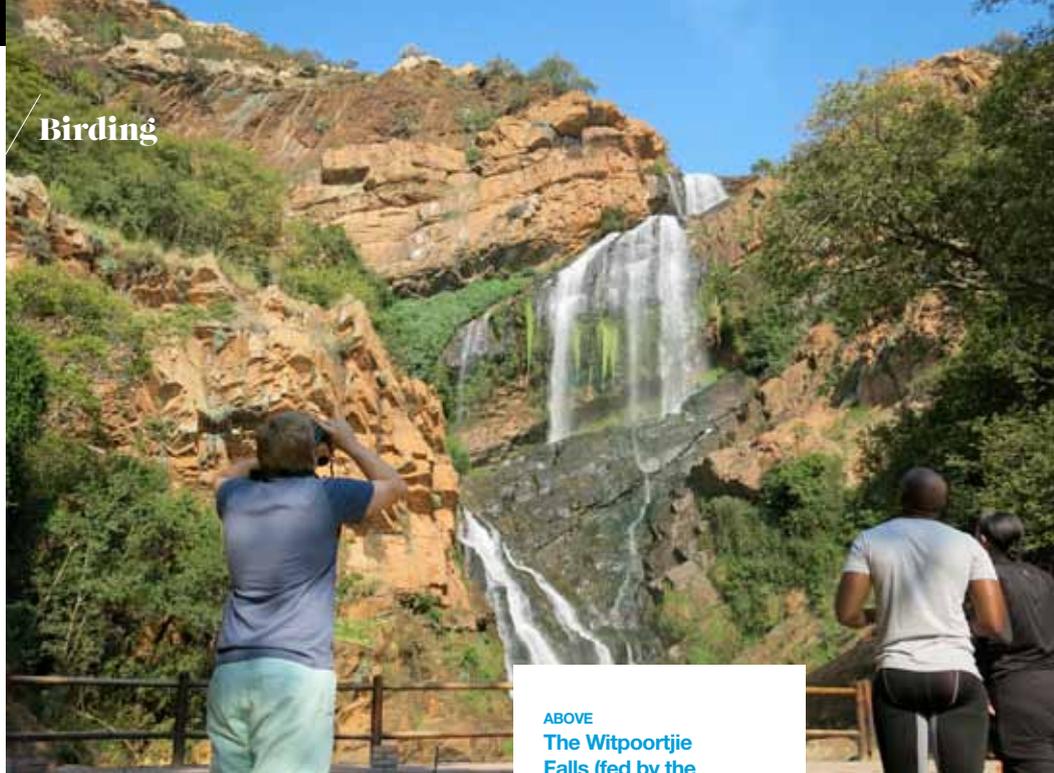


signed copy of Philip and Warwick Tarboton's *Birds of Jo'burg*. That evening, as my brother and I wait for our braai fire to burn down to coals, I use my new resource to ID a pair of African olive pigeons on a telephone line: fat, speckled birds with striking yellow eyes and feet. Somewhere out of sight a go-away bird (grey loerie) gives a noisy explanation of its common name: *g-waaay, g-waaay...*

BIRDS OF A FEATHER...

My brother has lived in Jozi for seven years but I am the first person to persuade him to make the trek to the Walter Sisulu Botanical Garden, in the far west of the city. We follow a mossy, canopied riverside walkway to the Witpoortjie Falls. The 70-metre waterfall is spectacular in its own right, but we are here to see the Verreaux's eagles that nest next to it (there has been a breeding pair here since at least the 1940s).

When we arrive at the Falls there is no sign of the famous eagles.



ABOVE
The Witpoortjie Falls (fed by the Crocodile River) is the 'centrepiece' of the 300-hectare Walter Sisulu Botanical Garden (and home to an eagles' nest). The Geological Trail, amid some of the oldest rocks in the world, leads up the one side of the waterfall

Mariette and Sue, volunteers from the Roodekrans Black Eagle Project, have set up a spotting scope and are chatting to a young family about the eagles. A woman with a large camera is pacing around impatiently. Even some well-toned joggers in full Lycra interrupt their workout to crane their necks skywards. There's a weird mix of excitement and resignation in the air, like wondering ➔

JO'BIRDERS BUCKET LIST

<p>VERREAUX'S EAGLE</p> <p>Urban eagles, recently listed as 'vulnerable' in Red Data book</p> <p>WHERE: Walter Sisulu Botanical Garden & Meyer's Farm</p> 	<p>FAIRY FLYCATCHER</p> <p>Near-endemic winter visitor, probably from Lesotho highlands</p> <p>WHERE: Walter Sisulu Botanical Garden & Klipriviersberg Nature Reserve</p> 	<p>ORANGE RIVER FRANCOLIN</p> <p>Much sought-after grassland range-restricted endemic</p> <p>WHERE: Klipriviersberg Nature Reserve</p> 	<p>OVAMBO SPARROWHAWK</p> <p>Elusive resident</p> <p>WHERE: Delta Park</p> 	<p>YELLOW WAGTAIL</p> <p>Uncommon summer visitor from Palearctic (Europe/Asia)</p> <p>WHERE: Northern Farm</p> 
<p>ORANGE-BREASTED WAXBILL</p> <p>Grassland bird; seems to be on the decline</p> <p>WHERE: Northern Farm & Klipriviersberg Reserve</p> 	<p>BROWN-BACKED HONEYBIRD</p> <p>Uncommon and inconspicuous</p> <p>WHERE: Klipriviersberg Nature Reserve</p> 	<p>AFRICAN GRASS OWL</p> <p>Secretive resident of disappearing grassland habitat; 'vulnerable' status in Red Data book</p> <p>WHERE: Northern Farm</p> 	<p>RED-CHESTED FLUFFTAIL</p> <p>Very elusive</p> <p>WHERE: Northern Farm</p> 	<p>HALF-COLLARED KINGFISHER</p> <p>Uncommon and easily overlooked</p> <p>WHERE: Walter Sisulu Botanical Garden</p> 

whether Kurt Cobain will pull himself together enough to make it out on stage...

And then, like true rock stars, the enormous eagles glide into view. And out of view again, just as quickly. For half an hour or so, they zoom in and out of our line of sight, occasionally landing on their nest to rearrange a twig. The lady with the big camera gets very excited when both eagles sit on the nest at the same time, and soon Mariette and Sue have an audience of a dozen or more, including a trio dressed as Shrek, Godzilla and the Fairy Godmother (there's a pantomime in the amphitheatre later). Even my deadpan brother is showing signs of enthusiasm.

The jovial, varied crowd makes for a completely different birding experience. Most of the people here wouldn't give a little stint or neddicky a second glance, but they're all entranced by the eagles. I doubt many of them will take birding much further, but on a Sunday morning in suburban Jo'burg they're connecting with the king of the skies, and that's got to count for something.

We walk back on the other side of the river, following signs to the Sasol Bird Hide. In a simple thatched structure next to a lake, six adults are crammed onto three tiny

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP
A white-winged widowbird; Raymond strolling through Soweto's green space, which attracts its fair share of 'specials'; the bird hide at the Walter Sisulu Garden is a busy hub on weekends



USEFUL CONTACTS

- **Soweto bird guide**
Raymond Rampolokeng:
+27 (0)72 947 3311,
bayofgracetours@gmail.com
- **Wits Bird Club**, the oldest in SA and one of the biggest (800 members): witsbirdclub.org.za
- **BirdLife South Africa** has seven affiliated birding clubs in Jo'burg (monthly meetings with a speaker, day trips and weekends away): birdlife.org.za
- **Birding Ecotours** has some of the best guides in SA:
info@birdingecotours.co.za

JOIN THE BUZZ

The African Bird Fair (3–4 September at Walter Sisulu Botanical Garden) is a great place to join a bird club or sign up for a course, and to buy ornithological books and art. September is also a good month for the Verreaux's eagle sightings. birdlife.org.za/events

GET INVOLVED

Online challenges have breathed new life into birding in South Africa. The **Wider Gauteng Challenge** runs all year and absolutely anyone can take part. Serious birders try to notch up 400 species in the year, but visitors who're only in the city a few days are more than welcome. Download the BirdLasser app and find out more on birdlasser.com/challenges.



benches. Sunlight pours into the room, but still the atmosphere is dusky and subdued, like some kind of bushveld Bodleian Library.

'Common moorhen,' mutters a guy in an orange cap.

'Green-backed heron,' whispers a lady in a floppy hat.

It is time for me to catch my flight. In our mad rush to the car we almost knock over a family with two young kids and a bird book.

'Inconsiderate bloody bird,' we hear the dad mutter. 'He flew away as soon as I found the right page.'

'There he is, Daddy!' says his daughter. 'What colour are his feet?' ■

There is a live webcam feed of the Roodekrans eagles' nest at the Walter Sisulu Garden on blackeagles.co.za



GET GOING DESTINATION: JOHANNESBURG

British Airways flies to Jo'burg from Cape Town, Durban, Port Elizabeth and London, as well as from Jo'burg to regional destinations – Harare, Victoria Falls, Livingstone, Windhoek and Mauritius. Visit ba.com.