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World Wetlands Day, 2 February

World Wetlands Day (WWD) is celebrated globally on 2 February every year. This day commemorates the signing of the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands, on 2 February 1971, in the Iranian city of Ramsar on the shores of the Caspian Sea. Since 1997, WWD has been celebrated by government agencies, non-governmental organisations, and groups of citizens at all levels of the community through various activities including raising public awareness of wetland values and benefits and their vital link to human well-being. This day, in 2014, will mark the 17th anniversary of the commemoration of World Wetlands Day and, most importantly, the 43rd anniversary of the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands. (SOURCE: *The Gumboot - News from Working for Wetlands*, September 2013.)

World Wetlands Day 2014 theme

The theme for 2014 is, *Wetlands and Agriculture*, linking to the designation of 2014 by the United Nations as the *International Year of Family Farming*. Globally about 70% of freshwater resources are currently used for agriculture, and the latest statistics predict that anticipated global population increases will make further demands on our capacity to produce food. While agriculture can become more efficient in terms of land, water, etc., there is no doubt that wetlands and water will continue to be threatened to meet the increasing demand for food production. What are the implications for wetlands given this scenario? What are the solutions? In South Africa, our approach will be to examine both the small scale use of wetlands for food security, and how the ecological infrastructure provided by wetlands can sustain and protect agricultural activities at all scales. We will zoom in on wise use and the sustainability of wetlands. We will focus on how wetlands can be used effectively and sustainably so that water quality and quantity is not compromised, and to ensure that challenges such as floods are mitigated. For more information on WWD 2014, please visit the Ramsar website: <http://www.ramsar.org>. (SOURCE: *The Gumboot - News from Working for Wetlands*, September 2013.)



Agulhas Working for Wetlands
Winners of the 2012/13 Best Project Award

Banner picture: Peter Chadwick, www.peterchadwick.co.za



Working for Wetlands champions the protection, rehabilitation and sustainable use of South Africa's wetlands through co-operative governance and partnership. The programme is managed by the South African National Biodiversity Institute on behalf of the departments of Environmental Affairs, Water Affairs and Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries, and forms part of government's Expanded Public Works programme.



Connecting to Society

Agulhas Plains wetlands

The Nuwejaars Wetland system is an area of immense diversity and conservation value. It consists of rare and endemic natural fynbos and wetlands, which are all interlinked by the streams and rivers of the Nuwejaars wetland ecosystem. This system drains the Southern Agulhas Plain forming a number of annual and permanent water bodies or *vleis*, the most notable of which are Soetendalsvlei and Voëlvlei and is inhabited by a large variety of avian and aquatic species, some of them extremely rare and endangered and some endemic to the area alone. The conservation value of the system is further enhanced as it ultimately feeds into the Heuningnesrivier on which is situated the De Mond Estuary, already listed as a Ramsar Wetland of International Importance. The very low gradients in the south-eastern plain result in significant wetland development, and create the second largest lacustrine wetland in South Africa, Soetendalsvlei. The Agulhas region is unique in terms of the wide variety of wetlands (freshwater springs, rivers, estuaries, lakes, vleis and endorheic pans) that occur within a relatively small area.



The Nuwejaarsrivier

The headwaters of the Nuwejaarsrivier are in the south-facing slopes of the Bredasdorp Mountains, the Koueberge to the west, the hills to the south of Elim and the north-facing slopes of the Soetanyberg. The five tributaries of the Nuwejaarsrivier are the Koue, Wolwegatskloof, Jan Swartskraal, Boskloof and Uintjieskuil. The length of the Nuwejaarsrivier from its western most source, through Soetendalsvlei to the confluence of the vlei's overflow channel with the Kars River is 55km. From this confluence it flows as the Heuningnesrivier for 15 km to De Mond and into the sea.

SOURCE: Wetland restoration: Nuwejaars, Heuningnes, Kars and Ratel wetland and river systems: information status quo report and recommendations, edited by G. Cleaver and L.R. Brown, 2005

Wetlands research and surveys on the Agulhas Plain

Ruth-Mary Fisher of the SANParks Cape Research Centre, with SANBI/Working for Wetlands/CapeNature/and Regional Department of Water Affairs, is conducting a wetlands survey on the Agulhas Plain. The purpose is to classify the types of wetlands (and wetland vegetation), of the Agulhas Plain (and beyond). Amphibian monitoring is conducted on ad hoc bases by CapeNature (Atherton de Villiers and Andrew Turner). Species of interest for CapeNature and SANParks are the threatened species: Western Leopard Toad (Endangered) and the Micro Frog (Critically Endangered), Cape Platanna (Endangered). An official research project, regarding amphibians, is registered with SANParks/CRC is by John Measey of NMMU, with Krystal Tolley (SANBI). The project title is: *Investigating the biodiversity, gene flow and dispersal capabilities of reptiles and amphibians in Table Mountain National Park and Agulhas National Park.*



A bird identification course for novice and intermediate bird-watchers in the Cape Agulhas region –

Anton Odendaal

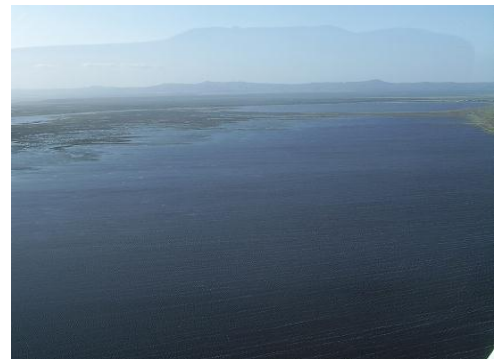
A "Flight for Birders" bird identification and conservation course will be presented at the *Suiderlig Dienssentum* in Struisbaai on 27 and 28 February 2014. The contents of the course have been changed dramatically at the end of 2013. In 2014 we will be celebrating the 10th anniversary of the course and we will now be celebrating our country's birds with photographs of some of the top wildlife photographers in South Africa. Much stronger emphasis is also being placed on conservation issues, in line with the MOU signed between the Overberg division of CapeNature and BirdLife Overberg. New additions to the course are a section focusing on the differences between the various families of LBJ's and other confusing species, as well as Birds of Prey, and how this applies to the Cape Agulhas region where the course is being presented. The cost is R 500,00 which includes the course manual, certificate endorsed by BirdLife South Africa and a year's free membership of BirdLife Overberg. To register and secure a place contact Elaine at mwjasser@mweb.co.za or 082 455 8402. All further queries could also be forwarded to Elaine.



Bird counts and monitoring at nature reserves and stewardship sites

Elaine Odendal on behalf of BirdLife Overberg has signed a MOU with the Overberg Division of CapeNature to assist them with bird counts and monitoring at nature reserves and stewardship sites. A summary of the MOU can be seen at http://www.westerncapebirding.co.za/conservation/455/summary_of_mou_between_capenature%28overberg%29_and_birdlife_overberg. The minutes of a recent meeting describes where this process is heading: http://www.westerncapebirding.co.za/conservation/495/blo_assisting_capenature_with_bird_monitoring_and_Counts.

Soetendalsvlei has been identified as one of the priority sites in the Overberg and they have asked that a team be put together to do regular (probably quarterly counts) at the vlei. Another part of this project relates to training and in this regard it was decided that two Flight for Birders bird identification and conservation courses will be presented in February at Hermanus and in the Cape Agulhas region. The purpose here would be two-fold: On the one hand to get more ordinary birders involved in such bird counts and on the other CapeNature wants to get as many of their staff as possible trained to become involved in such counts. This is being done because birds are such important biodiversity indicators. Eventually insects, frogs and mammals will become part of the process.



Our special frogs

28th February is Save our Frogs Day in South Africa. Of the 15 amphibian species thought to occur on the Agulhas Plain, three species (Cape platanna *Xenopus gilli*, Micro frog *Microbatrachella capensis* and Western leopard toad *Bufo pantherinus*) are listed as Threatened by the South African National Biodiversity Institute (SANBI). (SOURCE: SANBI; Agulhas National Park Management Plan 2013-2023). Frogs are some of the most threatened species on the planet, and South Africa is no exception. They are also important bio-indicators due to their sensitive skins and biphasic lifestyle. Habitat destruction, increasing levels of pollution in freshwater systems, disease and changes in climate, are starting to have noticeable effects on amphibian communities globally.

Despite their crucial role, amphibians are currently the most threatened class of vertebrate animal on Earth. In South Africa, 35 of our frog species are listed as critically endangered, endangered or vulnerable. The fact that one third of all amphibians are Red Listed should be an important warning to humans that our global environment is in jeopardy and that urgent conservation action is crucial. The aim of Save Our Frogs Day is to raise awareness about the global amphibian crisis, and the importance of wetlands in sustaining critical amphibian populations.

The Agulhas National Park (ANP) Birding project – Wim De Klerk

The ANP Birding Project has now completed its third year and begins to show statistics which can be of value to management. It has been another exceptional year of birding due to the high rainfall. For the first time in the history of the project, normal renosterveld was flooded so extensively that water birds were recorded like never before in places never before thought possible. Vlei areas were filled to the brim even as late as the 31st December 2013. The species list for the project has reached the 200 mark and stands at 207 after three years of intensive birding. This means 30 new species were recorded in 2013. A Red Knot, Knoet, *Calidris canutus* and a Greater Sand Plover, Grootstrandkiewiet, *Charadrius leschenaultii* were identified at De Mond Nature Reserve. The removal of the alien vegetation seems to have improved the wetlands even further and the fynbos seems to have recovered well after the 2009 veld fire. There is an abundance of food for the birds and this show in their numbers. The removal of alien vegetation has also revealed some excellent birding sites and the Agulhas Plains now have even more promise as a birding destination. Various vlei areas have potential for bird hides and these must be erected with care so as to address the need of the birding tourist, which means it will have to take into account the needs of birding photographers. Although the project started as a study of the ANP birds, it has very quickly shown that it is senseless to ignore the neighbouring Nuwejaars Wetlands SMA. This project has now evolved into an Agulhas Plains Project rather than just an ANP project. The two entities are so entwined, drain into the same systems and share a very large birding population. Therefore the name of the project will in future change to the Agulhas Plains birding project and the report will be all inclusive. With the new MYBIRDPATCH system, it makes sense to in future report to the Nuwejaars Wetlands SMA owners in the form of MYBIRDPATCH assessments as farms can now be registered as separate birding areas. The highlight of 2013 has to be the first recording of the RED DATA LIST – Endangered Hottentot Buttonquail, Kaapse kwarteltjie, *Turnix hottentottus*! This surely has to be promoted as the star attraction to the ANP as there is now proof of the existence of this endangered species in the park! SABAP also recognized the sighting of an European Honey-Buzzard, Wespedief, *Pernis apivorus*, the southernmost sighting ever.



Hottentot Buttonquail
(picture supplied)

Spotted in the Park



European Honey-Buzzard

The Agulhas Plains experienced lots of rain during the 2013 rainy season which caused flooding over a wide area. Excessive rain fell during January 2014 which caused flooding again. For images of this flood visit Peter Chadwick's blog <http://www.photodestination.co.za/flooding-over-the-agulhas-plain-january-2014.html>.

Lighthouse to Lighthouse MTB 2014

This popular mountain bike race takes place from 8th to 9th February from Danger Point to Cape Agulhas and back. For more information contact Boats Van Staden on 072 789 3627 / boats@vodamail.com. This event is organized by the Gansbaai Lions Club to generate money for real needs in the community.



Pictures cyclists: Dawid Du Bruyn

