

in the hide

I'VE joined the Cape Bird Club's monthly birding walk at Rondevlei because I want to know more about the winged visitors who besiege my home with a chorus of mad whoops and trills every morning. I wake up, each day, in a foreign country unable to decipher this lyrical language. I want to identify the orange tailed birds and name the glossy breasted ones that regularly lit past my window.

Merle Charlton, our guide on Rondevlei's three hour bird walk, thrusts her binoculars towards me declaring, "Red knobbed coot!" As I focus the lens, an exotic water bird appears – a creature with an alarming red bulge on top of a dramatic, bleached white beak. "Oh look, a baby", says Merle, pointing at the grey ball of fluff bobbing hesitatingly towards its mother's "coot-coot" call.

Despite their flamboyant appearance, Merle is not overly fond of coots. "Quite aggressive birds," she says with a trace of disapproval. Indeed by the end of our walk I've seen so many red knobbed coots that they have become oh-so-humdrum.

Although not much moved by the red knobbed coot, Merle takes infectious delight in other winged creatures. "Did you hear that lovely warble?" she asks. I had barely registered it. "That's the lesser swamp warbler. It's got a beautiful variety of warbles."

Merle pulls out an iPad, clicks on an app and plays me a recording of the swamp warbler's song. Increasingly, apps are usurping field guides. Smart phones are compact, fit easily into anoraks and conveniently carry a library worth of information.

Apps are just one of the developments that are changing bird watching's rather quaint, tweedy image. Globally, more people than ever are watching birds. Birding is an accessible way to connect with nature. It is one instance of technology, commerce and conservation working in harmony. Bird watching is packing an increasingly powerful economic punch. According to the New York Times, in America, birders now spend more than \$25 billion a year on birdfeed, binoculars and eco-tourism.

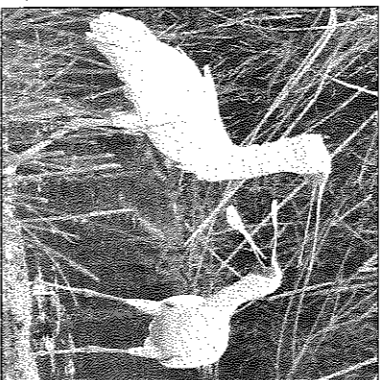
BIRDS OF A FEWATHER



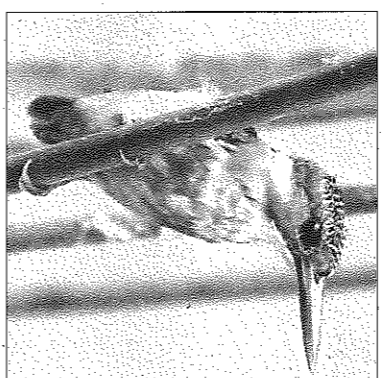
DAWN KENNEDY

BEYOND THE STOEP

Juggling binoculars, lists and a notepad while trying to focus on birds in flight is a tricky skill to master, but worth it. There's never a dull moment.



A MOUTHFUL: Two African Spoonbills arguing over breakfast.



BRIGHT: The Malachite Kingfisher is often spotted from the hides.

What I've learned in my first hour of bird watching is that a lot of bird watching is actually bird-listening. A bird is often heard before it is seen and identified by its mellifluous song. For example, Merle always thinks of Mary Poppins when she hears the cisticola's "chin-chin-churee" call.

Another distinctive bird is the blacksmith lapwing which has a call like a blacksmith's hammer. "Can we tick the bird if we just hear it?" A group member enquires. He's a lister, a sub-group of bird watchers that are dedicated to compiling "life lists" of all the species they have seen. Holding the record for the longest list is veteran British birder Tom

Gullick who officially listed 9,000 bird species.

Bird watching seems like straightforward activity. Look for birds, sight them in your binoculars and tick them off on your list. However, I'm battling with my equipment. The juggling act of managing binoculars, list and notepad is made more difficult by the howling wind that makes Rondevlei cool on even the hottest days. The cheap binoculars that I bought make me see double. Merle hands me her prized second hand Swarovski binoculars, bought recently in London. The view through the lens is resplendent. Since Merle started birding at the age of 14 the name Swarovski has

occupied the upper echelons of eye viewing. "I've waited 60 years for these binoculars," she tells me. Focusing on a flying bird requires more technique than I could imagine. According to Merle it is a skill which needs time to master.

Any difficulties that I face during the bird walk are nothing compared to the frustrations that I experienced trying to learn bird watching on my own. I bought a book and binoculars, but found flipping through the pages, focusing the lens and keeping my eye on a bird in flight was impossibly frustrating.

There's not a dull moment during my first day bird watching. Merle provides a constant, gentle patter of encyclopaedic information. "The Cape cormorant's tail is shorter than its head. The reed cormorant's tail is double the length of its head..." I'm amazed at how much I learn in just three hours. This morning, Rondevlei is awash with bird life. Apparently I'm blessed with beginners' luck as we see 43 species, the most sighted in the reserve this year.

Birds are not the only wildlife at Rondevlei. Here, nature abounds: A grey mongoose darts ahead of us on the path. A boomslang occupies the roof of a bird hide and the vlei is home to Bruns the hippo who has been known



REWARDING: Red-faced Mousebirds are often present around the reserve entrance.

to chase birdwatchers into the bushes as he charges along the path.

At the last bird hide, pleasantly exhausted by the wind, walking and information, I look at my contemplative companions, binoculars resting on the wooden ledges like hands held in prayer. We seem like a small group of Quaker-like people, sitting in spiritual communion with nature.

After three profoundly peaceful hours, leaving the reserve is like stumbling into the seventh circle of hell. After passing through Lavender Hill and Grassy Park I get struck for 20 minutes in a honking, hooting traffic jam of shoppers on Tokai Main Road. I want to leap from my vehicle and beg them to stop shopping and go watch birds instead.

Back home, my garden is a new place. I confidently name the Cape Robin-Chat and the Cape white eye to my teenage children who feign interest. It could be bowls, or golf, I tell them.

I'm following Merle's advice and taking bird watching slowly. "Just try and remember two species after each outing. Every time I went out if I could remember two I was doing well."

● The next bird walk at Rondevlei is December 6, 021 686 8951, www.capebirdclub.org.za



LOOK OUT: Scanning Rondevlei from the observation tower.

PICTURES: Otto Schmidt