

## BIRDING ON THE KNYSNA LAGOON

By Lorna Watt

### The Knysna CWAC count

The Knysna birders started the twice-yearly Co-ordinated Waterbird Count (CWAC) in 1993, which now makes 18 plus years of contribution to the knowledge of waterbird numbers on the Knysna estuary.

The CWAC project reaches the whole of South Africa and records information for non-passerine (non-perching) species of birds associated with wetlands. Currently the project curates waterbird data for at least 628 sites, by a network of volunteers numbering between 800 and 1000 people. Counts are co-ordinated country-wide by about 125 compilers and their teams.

Data is computerized by the Animal Demography Unit at UCT and made available to Wetlands International (WI) and the South African Department of Environmental Affairs, as well as many other local and international organizations and particularly those countries from which we have summer migrants arriving in about September each year. Many of our migrants hail from northern Siberia. The northern birds breed up there and then fly south for their winter when it is much too cold for them to remain there, with precious little food to eat, it all being covered by snow! While here they fatten up on our estuary before returning for their summer breeding period.

In Knysna in 1992 Prof Brian Allanson of the Knysna Basin Project, which has been doing so much research on the estuary, was proposing to apply for Ramsar Convention Wetland of International Importance status for the Knysna estuary and asked Joy von Korff and me what data there were on the numbers of waterbirds occurring here. There had been only one previous record, from about 1976, and so we approached ornithologist Dr Paul Martin from Port Elizabeth for assistance in planning the first bi-annual count in Knysna. That first count gave us a total of 5,357 waterbirds, making this a wetland of National Importance, not qualifying us for international status, which then required 20 000 waterbirds! With the assistance of Prof Brian who recorded the statistics, Paul Martin, Joy v Korff & I had a paper published in 2000 in the Transactions of the Royal Society of S Africa entitled 'Abundance and distribution of waterbirds on the Knysna Estuary'. Also, a book was published showing the CWAC statistics from 1992 to 1997, indicating that the Knysna Estuary was considered to be the top estuary out of 50 in SA in terms of conservation importance, and listed the birds recorded on the counts.

In 1993, our first year, we recorded 2730 Curlew sandpipers, northern Siberian summer migrants. After that the numbers fluctuated a bit with the most counted in 1998 at 3205. The floods seemed to have adversely affected the migrants on our lagoon in some years when the mudflats were covered in debris. Since 2009 we have seen a large decrease in Curlew sandpipers: there were only 740 in 2009, in 2010 there were 774 and in 2011 and 2012 we counted only 671, which is very few, sadly.

Prof Les Underhill from the ADU at UCT:

"I think there is a general downwards trend in Curlew Sandpiper numbers – which probably is a result of changes in the Arctic Tundra, in the far north of Siberia, where they breed. The tundra is one of the zones of the planet expected to be most severely impacted by climate change". We wonder about these changes and their causes, but it is certain that there is a change!

The 1993 total count was 5357 water birds, this last count was 3971. It seems that the decrease in migrant bird numbers from up north as far away as Siberia has followed with an increase in resident birds on the estuary. 324 Kelp gulls were counted this year, and to the consternation of many locals who consider them a nuisance, there were 373 (2011 – 433) Egyptian geese!

We also do a count of the sewage works birds – 242 this year. Birds fly to the sewage works for shelter and or food, but other water bird species there do not appear on the estuary very often. Another favourite area which we count is Woodbourne Pan. The birds preferring to feed in these areas include the dabchicks, purple swamphens, ruffs, water dikkops, the whitebacked night herons, the white-faced ducks and the moorhens and coots. Unusual visitors occur from time to time causing a flutter among the birding community. With the birdnet sites on the internet, information is passed on very quickly.

CWAC counts: We are fortunate to have had the committed involvement of SANParks Knysna who still supply us with 2 boats and their skippers, because 2 of the 6 teams need to access saltmarsh and mudflat areas of the estuary which are not really accessible by any other means. We also need to thank all of the many birders who have worked on the teams over the past 18 years. Their enthusiastic participation has been invaluable.

Before the start of last year's count we were excited by Anne Brash's find of 37 Blue Cranes on the salt marsh at Lake Brenton, seen by the 2 teams from Thesen jetty. Some people were surprised that these

were not recorded in our waterbird report. But of course, blue cranes are not waterbirds so unfortunately they didn't count! But it was a most unusual sighting, which has caused a great deal of interest and speculation about the weather, feeding grounds and climate change as it affects our national bird.

The African black oystercatcher is regarded as near-threatened because 20 years back the numbers were way down, only 5000 round the whole coast. Since then their breeding around the coast has been monitored very closely by volunteers, and numbers have improved satisfactorily. They breed on the rocky cliffs along from the Heads and along the Brenton beach on the sand. This summer we counted 68 birds on the estuary, and Steve Gettliffe and his team, who monitor the Thesen Island nests, have counted 10 chicks, which is most pleasing. 1 pair produced 3 chicks, which have survived so far. If we have trained ringers available the chicks are ringed at between 14 and about 22 days old. These rings help with monitoring the positions of the young birds. Our young ones appear to move down the coast towards Still Bay, and the Cape birds fly up to Walvis Bay and their ring numbers recorded there. The youngsters only come back to their home grounds in time for breeding when they are about 7 years old. After the breeding season here we see large numbers flocking and socialising on the beaches and cliffs. They eat mussels, limpets and other shell fish but never oysters, so their name sounds inappropriate!

Our resident waterbirds breed in all sorts of places they consider safe from predators. The oystercatchers have a hard time protecting their eggs and young from marauding gulls and also genets on the dunes. Oystercatchers are notoriously bad at selecting positions for their nests around this estuary, as they often lay below the spring high water mark and the eggs are washed away. They will attempt re-lays up to 3 times, and the pair on Castle Rock at Brenton has just produced one in the middle of February which is very late in the season, most hatching right in the middle of our tourist season. The eggs are just positioned on scrapes in the sand or 'slopey' cliffs when they have to be propped up in some way. But once the chicks have hatched the parents become very careful to protect their young, sometimes hiding them in rocky slits until they are old enough to run with the parents.

Our cormorants and gulls breed in reasonable numbers on the cliffs at the Heads: on the Featherbed side and also outside on the little islands off Coney Glen and on the Western Heads cliffs, as well as in trees close to the water. Further out to sea, about 5 kms out, we encounter the Cape Gannet, the Blackbrowed albatross, petrels and various other interesting seabirds. When the fish bait balls are out there, they're all feeding and we find many species of dolphin, whale and also the Cape fur seals and African penguins going about their business. Climate change appears to have affected many species, among them Orcas – killer whales – because of warming temperatures. Their Arctic killing grounds are expanding and threatening the marine eco-system. They're eating fewer fish and more aquatic animals like seals and baleen whales which can be twice their size.

Of course these are not counted as part of our annual CWAC counts but they all make up a fascinating part of our natural heritage.

#### Statistics

Started 1<sup>st</sup> Atlas 1984, SABAP 1 in 1989, SABAP 2 started 2007, CWAC 1993

Voelvlei: ephemeral: 2012 summer: 8464

Knysna lagoon: 3967

Oystercatchers: most: 2010 winter: 75, this summer : 68 were near threatened before survey & awareness & ringing started 1990-ish

Egyptian geese: up to 1997, most 49, now 2012: 373

Cape corm used to be only in winter till collapse of w coast fishing then here all year in big numbers, winter last year at least 200 juveniles in lagoon, they left a week before CWAC and reports show they went back up to the west coast. Only counted 12 in Jan 2012 cwac.

Thesen Is : Our thickknees on the grassy knoll off our deck been scratching around a week or so ago and now sitting on eggs, also quite late, it is their second hatching this summer. We delayed doing an alteration because our wagtails were also into their second hatching for the summer, I feel bad having to take the creeper where they built their nest away but there are other creepers for them to nest in. I don't know if you've heard that the oystercatcher pair on the berm on the north side of Thesen has two chicks.

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