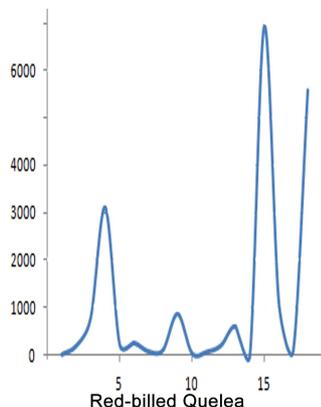


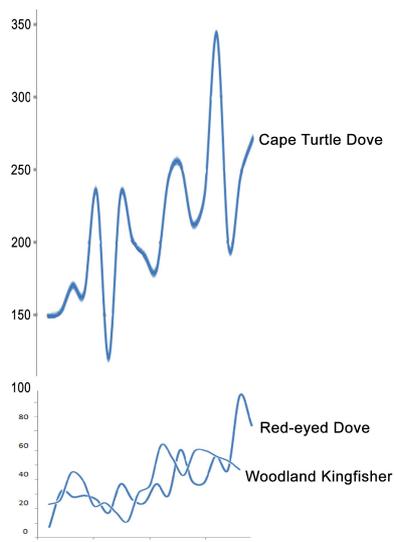
NYLSVLEY WOODLAND CENSUS, 18th YEAR, 4-5 February 2017

The 18th annual census of woodland birds in Nylsvley Nature Reserve was done on 4-5 February 2017. A shortage of leaders resulted in only 15 transects being completed on Saturday and the remaining 3 were done on the Sunday the 5th. Weather conditions were ideal for counting on both mornings, all routes being counted for 120 minutes around the required 06h00-08h00 time-frame. The event was supported by 51 people, with 3 teams coming from the Bosveld Voëlklub and one from the Naboomspruit Voëlklub. Both clubs are thanked for their valuable contribution to the project.



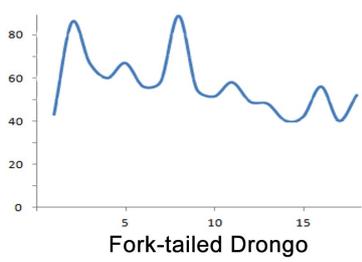
This was another year of queleas *en masse*, nearly matching that which occurred in the summer of 2014. The 2017 total of birds counted by all teams (8624) was, as in 2014, swamped by the numbers of queleas present (5596 counted) and their presence, as in 2014, was the result of good December-January rains which have produced a rich harvest of seeding grasses along the floodplain, especially *Brachiaria*, *Setaria* and *Panicum*. As before, quelea numbers were highest in the *Acacia* areas along the floodplain.

Excluding the queleas, this year's count of 3038 species was a little above the 18-year average of 2708 (see table), and the 134 species recorded during the count was in line with the long-term average of 133. Two species new to the census data (but not to Nylsvley) were recorded this year, Verreaux's Eagle-Owl and Purple Indigobird and they bring the number of woodland species recorded during 18 years of censusing to 211. Many of these occur at low density in the woodland (e.g. Pygmy Kingfisher, Brown-backed Honeybird, Grey Tit-Flycatcher, Little Bee-eater) and so often go undetected during the censuses while others are only erratically present (e.g. African Green Pigeon, African Harrier-Hawk). In fact, it is only about 70-80 species that are routinely present every year with another 50-60 that get recorded in some years but not others.



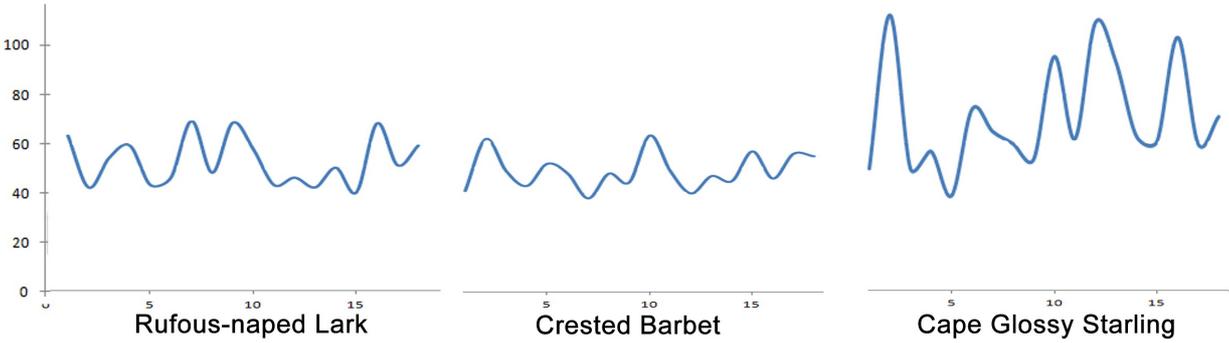
Cape Turtle Dove retains its place as the second most frequently counted bird in the woodland (after queleas) and its numbers have increased steadily over the years from around 150 in the early years to around 250 currently (see graph alongside). Any ideas on why this should be happening and whether or not it mirrors a national trend would be welcomed. Red-eyed Doves, although much less numerous than Cape Turtle Doves, have also increased progressively over the years (see graph alongside); so too has the Woodland Kingfisher (shown alongside), Rattling Cisticola and a number of other species. Others in the "top 10" this year are Barn Swallow (104, well below average), Cattle Egret (189, well above average), Grey Go-away-bird (130, above average), Rattling Cisticola (183, the highest number yet counted), Cape Glossy Starling (60, average), Swainson's Spurfowl (114, above average), Arrow-marked Babbler (58, average) and

Spotted Flycatcher (80, above average).

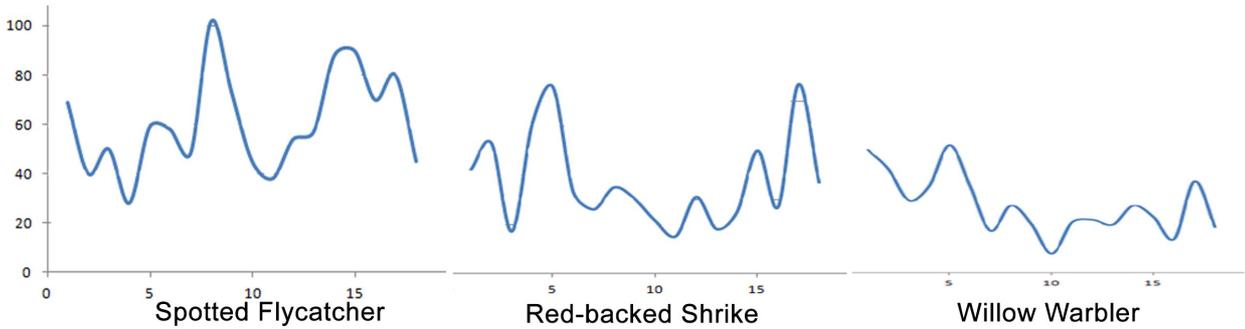


In contrast to these “increaser species” there are a number that appear to be decreasing in numbers. One of these is the Fork-tailed Drongo (see graph alongside), counts of this bird having dropped from 60-70 in the early years to 40-50 currently. As it is a conspicuous, easily detected and easily identified bird this decline would appear to be real and it would be interesting to see if this correlates with local environmental variables such as rainfall, changing game numbers and composition, veld burning history, etc.

But the numbers of many others of the commoner and more visible species seem to remain at the same levels year after year as shown by the three examples given below.



Three Palearctic migrants are regular visitors to Nylsvley's woodlands and, while the numbers of two of them (Spotted Flycatcher, Red-backed Shrike) appear to have remained relatively unchanged over the years, the third, Willow Warbler has declined, from counts of about 40 in the early years to currently about 20 birds. See graphs below.



If quelea and Cattle Egret numbers are excluded from the census results for the three woodland types this year (*Acacia* - 1040 birds/96 species, *Burkea* – 697/83, *Combretum* – 1112/104) *Combretum* edged above *Acacia* both in terms of numbers and diversity – perhaps merely an artefact of there being more hotshot birders doing the *Combretum* routes this year? *Burkea*, as always, came in a late third on both numbers and diversity. The table attached here lists the top 100 species recorded in 2017, sorted in their order of abundance and showing proportionately in which woodland types they were recorded.

The continued support of the Wits Bird Club and the many participants in this ongoing project is much appreciated and everyone who participated this year from the organisers to the cooks to the dawn patrol, are most sincerely thanked for their time and effort. We hope to see you all again next year!

Warwick Tarboton, 8 February 2017