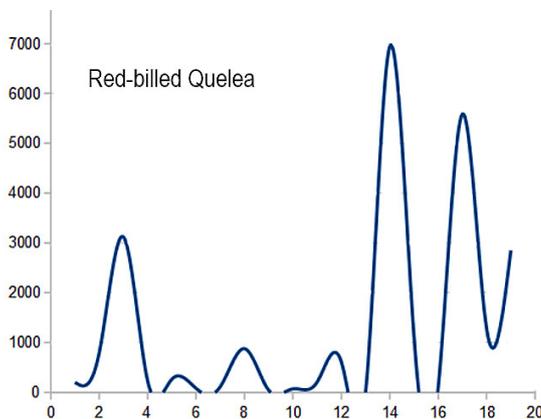


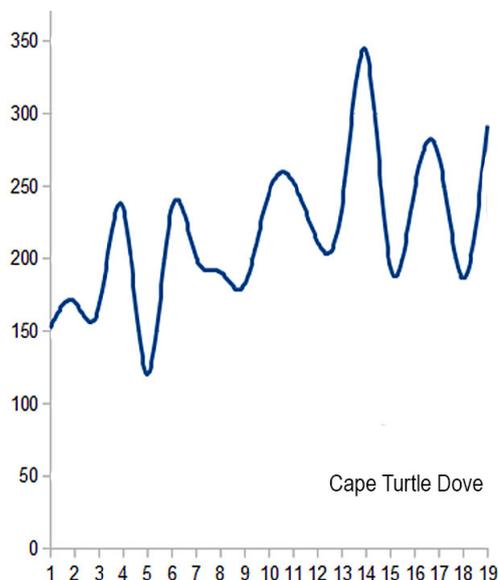
NYLSVLEY WOODLAND CENSUS, 19th YEAR, 25-27 January 2019

The annual censusing of woodland birds in Nylsvley Nature Reserve began in January 2000 and it has continued annually to the present year, timed to take place each year during the last week of January or (less frequently) in the first week of February. The first count was very much experimental, aimed at putting in place standard routes and developing a repeatable method and the results from this first year have not been included in the long-term results. This year's was the 19th post-2000 consecutive census. The 18 routes that were established in the first year have been used consistently since, and there are six in each of the three woodland types on Nylsvley. Census teams (typically consisting of 2-4 members) each start their route at or close to 06h00 and walk slowly for a fixed time of 120 minutes, recording on a standard form every encounter (heard or seen) with every bird on the route. The routes are so-designed that the censusers walk with the sun behind them. No playback is used to lure birds in, and where groups of birds are encountered the individuals are counted as far as possible. Sixty six people participated this year and a couple of the routes counted on Saturday 26th were recounted with different teams on the following morning, Sunday 27th. Weather conditions were ideal for counting on both mornings.

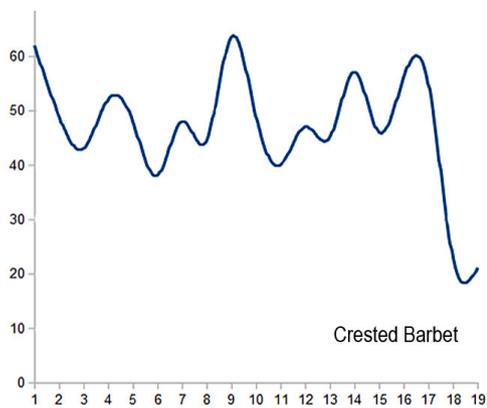


It was another year in which **Red-billed Quelea** numbers (2849) dominated the species total, although their numbers did not match those counted in either 2014 (6940) or 2017 (5586). But, as the graph alongside shows, this year's result is well above the numbers counted in most other years. As has been suggested in previous high counts, it was probably good rains about a month before the count that brought on a good grass seed crop that accounted for their high numbers in 2019. Their numbers were more or less evenly distributed across the three woodland types.

Excluding queleas, this year's count of 3479 birds was higher than the 19-year average of 2771; the 135 species total, though, was in line with the long-term average of 133. One species new to the woodland census bird list (but not new to Nylsvley), the **Lesser Grey Shrike**, was recorded and a couple of others that are seldom recorded (e.g. **Lizard Buzzard**, **Kalahari Scrub Robin**) also contributed to the total. Out of the 220 or so species recorded during all the counts made over the years, 74 have been recorded every single year (see Table 1) – interestingly, **Red-billed Quelea** is not among them. The every-year species include several (e.g. **Bearded Woodpecker**, **Golden-breasted Bunting**) that, although consistently recorded, are never commonly present. Vagrants occur frequently and there are 21 species that have been recorded only once in 19 years and 12 only twice.

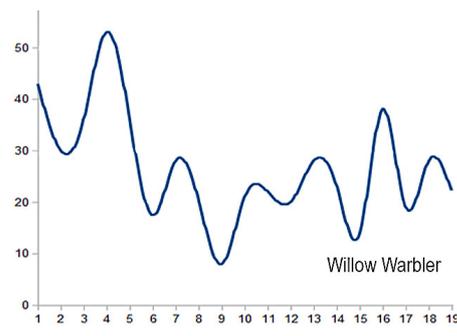
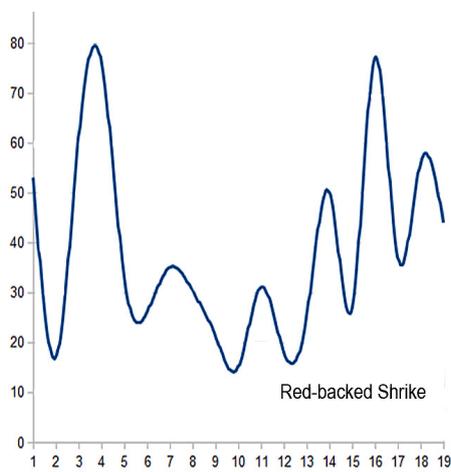
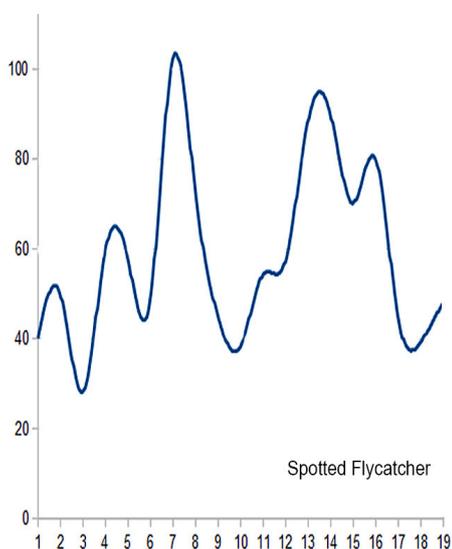


Cape Turtle Dove (Table 2) retains its place as the second most frequently counted bird in the woodland and its numbers continue to increase (from around 150 in the early years with 291 counted this year (see graph alongside). The others in the "top 10" this year were **Barn Swallow** (257, well above average), **Grey Go-away-bird** (148, above average), **Rattling Cisticola** (148, above average), **Arrow-marked Babbler** (122, above average), **Swainson's Spurfowl** (91, above average), **Red-eyed Dove** (73, above average), **Neddicky** (68, above average), **African Grey Hornbill** (65, an unexpected newcomer to the top) and **Cape Glossy Starling** (65, about average). **Red-eyed Doves**, **Woodland Kingfisher**, **Rattling Cisticola** and a number of other species maintained their upward trend this year.



By contrast, counts suggest that several species are declining (e.g. Black-collared Barbet, Marico Flycatcher, Brubru?). Until this year, **Crested Barbet** numbers remained relatively constant but in 2019 they took a plunge (see graph alongside). Being a conspicuous, easily detectable bird, it is unlikely that they were overlooked and this is probably a true reflection of the situation on the ground. Without further evidence it remains unexplained and it will be interesting to see what 2020 brings.

Three non-breeding migrants from the Palearctic, all small insectivorous species, are regular visitors to Nylsvley and their numbers have shown wide ups and downs over the years. The graphs below show the trends in each case: the numbers of **Spotted Flycatcher** would seem to be about what they were in the early years, **Red-backed Shrike** numbers have increased, and **Willow Warbler** numbers have declined, in their case from about 40 in the early years to about 20 currently.



If quelea and Cattle Egret numbers are excluded, the numbers and diversity of species in the three woodland types in 2019 were: *Acacia* - 1036 birds/98 species, *Burkea* - 1084/102, *Combretum* - 1226/103. *Acacia* typically surpasses the other two woodlands in both numbers and diversity but this year the *Combretum* edged above *Acacia* - an artefact, perhaps, of the deployment of the collective birding skills across the routes? Many species show strong preference for one or other woodland type but, because of the relatively small size of Nylsvley, most of the routes don't stay strictly confined to a single woodland type and so the distinction becomes blurred. Examples of such habitat preference are:

- Cape Turtle Dove** 61-125-105 (most at home in *Burkea*)
- Grey Go-away-bird** 49-25-74 (most at home in *Combretum*)
- Rattling Cisticola** 65-36-47 (most at home in *Acacia*)
- Neddicky** 5-36-27 (avoids *Acacia*)
- African Grey Hornbill** 9-45-11 (most at home in *Burkea*)
- Grey-backed Cameroptera** 28-14-9 (most at home in *Acacia*)
- Crested Francolin** 33-7-10 (most at home in *Acacia*)
- Spotted Flycatcher** 5-32-11 (most at home in *Burkea*)
- Willow Warbler** 2-17-3 (most at home in *Burkea*)

(The numbers given above are individuals counted in 2019 in *Acacia*, *Burkea* and *Combretum* respectively)

The Nylsvley woodland census owes its success to the continued financial support of the Wits Bird Club and to the many birders who participate, some having been involved since the beginning; Bosveld Voëlklub (which contributed 5 teams this year) and the Naboomspruit Voëlklub (1 team) are especially thanked for their continuing support. The census is very much a team effort, starting (and ending) with Marion Mengell who puts the show together every year, to the dawn patrol that go out and count the birds, to the data capturers, the cooks who feed the team, and to the staff at Nylsvley who make the routes passable by mowing them beforehand, and to Ron Mengell who marks the routes and organises the gate keys: a big thank you to everyone who is involved in one way or another and we hope to see you again for the 20th year finale!

Warwick Tarboton,
30 January 2019