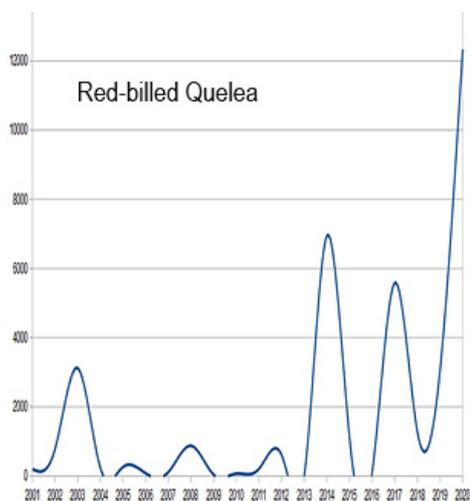


NYLSVLEY WOODLAND CENSUS, 21st YEAR, 25-26 January 2020

The 21st annual census of woodland birds in Nylsvley Nature Reserve was done on 25-26 January 2020. Fifty seven people participated in the counts and the usual 18 routes were counted on Saturday, with three repeated on Sunday. The Bosveld Voëlklub fielded 18 people and covered four routes and a fifth route was done by the Naboomspruit Voëlklub - both clubs are thanked for their important contribution to the project. As always, each route was censused for two hours, each team starting at or close to 06h00. Throughout the two hours the weather was heavily overcast with some patchy drizzle and it is perhaps because of this that we recorded our lowest species total in 20 years (121) and, were in not for the queleas, our lowest number of birds in 20 years, 2264 (but 14602 if the queleas are included).



This was another year in which the number of Red-billed Quelea counted over-ran the numbers of all the other birds censused. It was discovered that they were breeding *en masse* in the reedbeds on the floodplain in Nylsvley and a thumb-suck put the nests present here in excess of 10 000. Flocks of queleas commuting to the site crossed the acacia census routes in waves, and the acacia teams collectively counted some 12 000 birds passing over (all in the same direction towards the colony), the largest number yet counted in 20 years. This quelea spike, the fourth in 20 years is shown in the graph alongside. Interestingly, three of the four quelea events on Nylsvley have occurred in the last seven (drier than average) years (2014, 2017, 2020) and very few or no queleas were counted in Nylsvley in the preceding decade; could it be related to rainfall cycle? Lets see what next year brings.

One of the morning's highlights was watching a Eurasian Hobby attempting to catch a bird from the clouds of passing queleas, repeatedly swooping into the flock but each time coming out the other side empty-handed.

Queleas aside, the top species were mostly the regular candidates: Cape Turtle Dove (255, $x=218$), Rattling Cisticola (108, $x=96$), Swainson's Spurfowl (100, $x=70$, the highest number yet counted), European Bee-eater (90, $x=62$), Grey Go-away-bird (87, $x=106$), Cattle Egret (65, $x=113$), Arrow-marked Babbler (56, $x=70$), Woodland Kingfisher (49, $x=41$), Crested Francolin (48, $x=53$), and this year Grey-backed Camaroptera (53, $x=43$) moved into the top 10. The decline in numbers recorded this year was spread across a range of species including some of the above-named birds. Very obvious was the decline in swallow numbers (41 counted, $x=209$) - this may be an artifact of the weather, swallows being reluctant fliers in rainy conditions. Other species that came in with unusually low numbers are not as readily explainable. For example: Chinspot Batis (counted 6, $x=18$), Spotted Flycatcher (counted 14, $x=56$), Cape Glossy Starling (counted 27, $x=69$), Red-backed Shrike (counted 17, $x=38$), Crested Barbet (counted 21, $x=45$). Whether these reduced numbers are an artifact of the day's weather conditions remains to be seen. By contrast, the numbers of many other species remained in line with previous years' counts and in a number of cases they increased, e.g. Natal Spurfowl (counted 26, $x=17$), Bearded Woodpecker (counted 15, $x=5$) and the seven cuckoo species recorded (73 counted, $x=45$). The day's results can be seen in the accompanying spreadsheet.

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. The census is very much a team effort, from the dawn patrol that go out to count birds, to the data capturers, the organisers, the cooks who feed the team and the staff at Nylsvley who make the routes passable by mowing the tracks we use for counting. Although Marion couldn't be with us on the day, her meticulous preplanning ensured that the event ran smoothly ... thank you Marion, and thank you to everyone else who participated! A year ago it was thought that his 21st count was going to be the grand finale, but there is now general consensus that the initiative should continue into the future. How, and who will take up the reins, is presently under discussion and there will, I am sure, be a report-back from Friends of Nylsvley in due course. Rest assured your help will still be needed!

Warwick Tarboton
30 January 2020