

MIGRATORY BIRDS –

Nature's long- distance adventurers

With long-haul flights these days we can travel almost anywhere. But imagine you had to cross a continent on your own steam? Many of our feathered friends – some no bigger than mice – do exactly that.

The annual migration of birds within and across continents remains one of the world's greatest natural wonders. Every year, a special two-day celebration is held worldwide in honour of the estimated 50 million birds (around 19% of the world's total bird species) that take flight every year to travel hundreds or even thousands of kilometres.

The Day is organised by the Convention on the Conservation of Migratory Species of Wild Animals and the African–Eurasian Migratory Waterbird Agreement – two treaties that represent various countries. This year, World Migratory Bird Day was held on 11 and 12 May. The day is celebrated in over 65 countries, including South Africa.



The Barn Swallow is an annual visitor to South Africa.

The migration of birds is a natural process, whereby different birds fly over long distances to find the best places to live and raise their young. There are many different migration patterns. Most birds migrate from breeding areas in the north in summer, to the south where they can sit out the cold northern winter. However, some birds breed in southern parts of Africa and migrate to northern wintering grounds,

or horizontally to enjoy the milder coastal climates in winter.

In South Africa more than 100 migratory bird species have been recorded, including species that fly across the continent as well as those that migrate longer distances between our country and northern Europe and Asia. One of the most important threats to our birds is mining.

The survival of at least 15 of the migratory bird species in South Africa is being threatened. One of these is the Blue Swallow, which is listed as Critically Endangered.

There are many reasons why migratory birds should be conserved. Their



World Migratory Bird Day

Multimedia resources

To learn more about South African birds:

- www.birdlife.org.za
- www.witsbirdclub.org.za (South Africa's oldest bird club)
- www.sanparks.co.za/groups/birders/ (for bird watching in South Africa's national parks)



World Migratory Bird Day

To learn more about migratory birds:

- www.worldmigratorybirdday.org
- www.youtube.com/watch?v=bTvqXVFQlIs
- www.unep-aewa.org/
- www.migration.net/

beauty and behaviour are a source of joy and inspiration for millions of people. In almost all cultures, flocks of birds have announced the arrival of spring for centuries, and the yearly rebirth of nature associated with it. In ancient times, the social acceptance of birds as messengers of life was accompanied by the knowledge that migration had an important role to play in the functioning of nature and its processes.

Migratory birds are specially engineered to fly fast and across long distances. However, their journey is often an exhausting one during which they push themselves to their limits. The Red Knot, for example, which is just under a ruler-length long (24 cm), breeds in Siberia and overwinters on the west coast of Africa, some even going down to South Africa. During its migration the bird loses about half its body weight of 220 g.

Migratory birds therefore rarely fly to their destination non-stop but interrupt their journey frequently. Similar to human transport systems of harbours, airports and roads, migratory birds depend on these international networks of natural sites for food, safety, breeding and moulting, as well as stopover areas which act as refuelling stations between breeding and non-breeding areas.

Unfortunately, human activities have resulted in the destruction of many of these resting spots. If we don't step in and protect what is left, we could lose some of our travelling feathered friends to extinction within the next few decades. The main message of this year's World Migratory Bird Day was that we as countries, organisations and communities, need to work together to ensure that migratory birds can continue to travel, refuel and reach their destinations. □

SA Bird of the year 2013: The elusive white-winged flufftail

The South African Bird of the Year for 2013 is about the size of a sparrow, is rarely seen and so secretive that more than 130 years after its discovery in South Africa very little remains known about it.

The critically-endangered white-winged flufftail is endemic to Africa, and travels between Ethiopia and South Africa. The little bird favours high-altitude wetlands, and it is speculated that the white-winged flufftail migrates between these two countries, arriving at suitable habitat within South Africa in summer. However, this has not been proved.

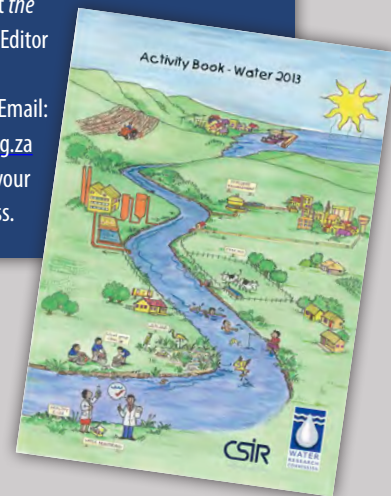
The bird is ground breeding, and has very specific habitat requirements regarding altitude, grass type, water level and temperature. There are only a handful of sites in the country where the white-winged flufftail can be found.

(Source: BirdLife SA & Middelpunt Wetland Trust)

- To learn more about the white-winged flufftail and its wetlands habitat Visit: <http://www.birdlife.org.za/events/bird-of-the-year> or Watch: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m0rEbNf80lo>

CSIR-WRC Activity Book back by popular demand

The Water Research Commission (WRC) has republished the popular CSIR WRC Water Activity Book. Suitable for children ages 7 to 14, the book contains various water-related activities, including water word search games, water snakes and ladders, among others. It is a useful tool to have in the classroom to explain, for example, water pollution and the impact of alien invasive plants. To get your free Activity Book, contact the *Water Wheel* Editor at Fax: (012) 331-2565 or Email: laniv@wrc.org.za and provide your postal address.



European Roller



Red-footed Falcon

A couple of Southern African birds that take part in the annual migration to the Northern Hemisphere.



European Bee-eater



Woodland Kingfisher



Wood Sandpiper