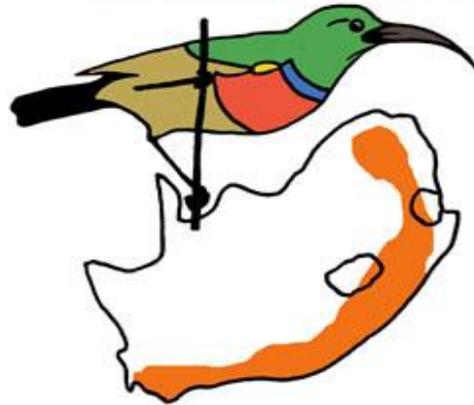


SABAP2



Winning Performance at Gouritsmond

Donald Reid

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WINNING PERFORMANCE AT GOURITSMOND

If there were Oscars for birds, I would propose a category called "Best performance by a bird defending its nest from a predator"

"And the winner is Kittlitz's Plover" (cue loud applause)

So, on what do I base this award?

Well, I was recently atlasing pentad 3420_2150 which includes the small coastal town of Gouritsmond, at the mouth of the Gourits River not far from Mossel Bay. The Gourits River has its origin at the confluence of the Gamka and Olifants rivers, south of Calitzdorp in the Klein-Karoo and winds its way to the Indian Ocean across plains and through mountains.

Approaching the sea it widens into a broad estuary which is humming with human activity in the holiday season, when the town expands its population by about 80%, but was dead quiet when I visited it on a weekday in October 2018 and I had the whole parking area at the boat launch site to myself, other than a waste van which came to empty the rubbish bin.



Braving the strong cold wind (seemingly unseasonal, but those who live along the southern Cape coast will tell you to expect 4 seasons in one day), I ventured up and down the river's wide muddy margin, recording the Plovers and other shorebirds present, of which the Kittlitz's Plover was the most prominent.

The shoreline was occupied by several other long-distance migrant species which favour this habitat and I took the opportunity to photograph some of them as best I could in the windy conditions

Common Ringed Plover, a polar migrant which is present in Southern Africa from September to April;

Common Greenshank, a Palaearctic summer visitor, mainly from August to April;

Common Whimbrel, non-breeding migrant with circumpolar origin, present from August to March; and

Sanderling, non-breeding migrant from the arctic tundra, present from September to April

When I was chilled through, I popped back to my car to escape from the icy wind, which my 3 layers of clothing were battling to defend. On one of my forays along the shoreline, a Kittlitz's Plover's curious behaviour caught my attention - it scurried off as I approached, then suddenly dropped flat on its belly, wings spread wide and flapping about as if mortally injured.





Stepping cautiously closer until I was about 3 metres away, it miraculously recovered, ran further and repeated the dramatic death scene while watching me with beady eyes. All the while it was leading me away, presumably from a nest which was not apparent, and I did not try too hard to find it for fear of giving the plover a heart attack.



The plover repeated this act each time I approached, and the drama of its performance had me chuckling in delight and admiration for the ingenuity of the species.

Before long, the Kittlitz's Plover had led me far away down the river margin, and I turned to retrace my steps towards the parking area, whereupon the plover also turned and flew back so that he was just ahead of me and promptly repeated the act once more.

Once I was close to the parking area again, I decided that it was enough teasing for the day and I returned to the car, with the plover watching me go - I imagined he had a look of "why go now, we were just starting to have some fun"

Roberts VII describes this behaviour *inter alia* as follows: "When predator present, performs distraction displays including injury feigning, waving one or both wings and fanning tail to attract predator's attention, sometimes flopping forward along ground.."

My morning's atlasing had once again turned into an unique birding encounter!



Links

Read more about my adventures on my blog: <https://mostlybirding.com/category/atlasing/>

References

Hockey PAR, Dean WRJ, Ryan PG (2005) *Roberts Birds of Southern Africa*. Trustees of the John Voelcker Bird Book Fund, Cape Town.

