

The Adventures of a Birder (Part 1)

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The start of it all 30 years ago came when a friend invited me to go on an outing with a club to which she belonged. She said to me that they are all very nice people coming from many professions - what she didn't say was that they were, and still are for that matter, a little eccentric.

"Well" I thought "why not go and see what these people find so interesting about birds" to me, although I had studied Zoology, birds were just animals with wings. I didn't realize then what an absorbing and fascinating pastime this was destined to be. It is a study that encompasses travel, interest in other sciences like Botany (what kind of tree is that bird sitting in?); Geology (why are those birds living in such an inhospitable area?); History (the stories of explorers of our wonderful country 200 years ago). I have even dipped into the mysteries of Latin and Greek in my attempts to understand the scientific names that have been given to our feathered friends

My first outing was a small walk along the stream at Irene farms where my friend stepped off the path (in an attempt to get a better view of a bird) onto the solid-seeming green surface next to her, only to disappear up to her neck. She had stepped on water weed which was covering the surface of the water. I must say this put me off a bit as it seemed a slightly dangerous occupation. Six months later however I thought I had better give this thing another try. This time the outing was to Rooiwal Sewage works an even more weird destination but I was soon to realize that birds favour sewage works and rubbish dumps. One of our members was the Canadian ambassador while he was in South Africa. He told us that he had a suspicious reputation among his colleagues as his first question on arrival at a new post was always "Where are the nearest Sewage works?"

Suffice it to say I was soon drawn into this hobby despite the snide comments of family and friends. I didn't look back after I had been adopted by the intrepid Lilian and Kay Winterton who was a retired clinic doctor. She loved maps and her ambition seemed to be to drive on every track however faint in the Transvaal in her Chev fleetline. That car was tougher than many 4x4s are today and I must say the thought of hijacking never entered our heads when we stopped on the side of the road to enjoy the contents of the ever-present tea basket.