

DISCOVERING THE WORLD OF BIRDS

This, my first article on birding, appeared in the Eastern Province Herald on August 28, 1999, under the headline, "Sweet lullaby of birdland".

FOR the more than forty years I have walked this earth I have had only a casual awareness of my feathered friends, the birds.

I have heard certain bird calls for as long as I can remember, but have never bothered to find out which bird is making them.

It has taken an eight-year-old child to change all that.

For the past six months or so, Luke, my elder son, has developed a keen interest in wild birds. And I find it has rubbed off on me – although I will always remain a novice in the bird-watching stakes.

How many bird species does your average person know? More importantly, how many can he or she identify?

Do you, for instance, know what a sparrow looks like?

I didn't, until I asked Luke if he could identify the little bird with a black and white "helmet" that was chirping merrily on the TV aerial above us as we washed the car. "A Cape sparrow," came the assured reply.

So the proverbial "sparrow's chirp" suddenly takes on a literal meaning and significance.

Early the next day I spotted a sparrow on our lawn – catching the worm, as it were.

Of course we all know what a swallow looks like. Or do we?

In fact, in the past few months that we have been seriously bird-watching, the swallow (one of which doesn't make a summer) has eluded us. But I've seen superb colour illustrations of various swallows in Luke's *Sasol Birds of Southern Africa* field guide, so I'll be hoping to spot those distinctive pointed tail feathers before long.

I used to dismiss those omnipresent grey birds that make rumbling sounds as "*sommer pigeons*". Now I know that we get at least three main types in this area: the feral pigeon, the redeye dove and the laughing dove.

The egret I associated with cattle and farms, but we have even encountered species of these ubiquitous white birds in St George's Park.

And why is it that when you become aware of birds, they suddenly seem to "find" you?

Newton Park, where I live, appears in the past few months to have acquired a whole flock of pied crows. We see them all the time.

Of course even I knew about the hadeda – but not that its real name is the hadeda ibis.

The mousebird is not much liked, but I've discovered that the variety common around these parts is more accurately known as the speckled mousebird.

These, however, are the relatively mundane species. Birding becomes fun when you start spotting the real gems – and it helps to have a "fundi" around to put a name to them for you.

And, in Port Elizabeth, where better to look than in the Baakens Valley?

Settlers Park, early in the day, is a veritable birds' paradise. From the moment you pull up in the main car park, you hear and see a vast multitude of wonderful species.

The nearby large coral trees, currently in bloom, attract masses of African black and greater double-collared sunbirds – two of the most beautiful species to be seen in our area. The

double-collared, with its brilliant red, blue and green colours, is unmistakable, and a firm favourite with our family.

They are the most spectacular fliers too, managing to plunge between branches at break-neck speed without so much as touching a leaf or twig.

About the same size as these tiny fellows with their long, curved beaks, are the more demure Cape white-eyes, which seem to fly around in happy troops.

Another bird with a white-ringed eye to be seen in the park is the Cape bulbul. Its cousin, the sombre bulbul, has a call which for decades I had heard but only now have been able to fit to a bird: "Willie!" it shouts, for all to hear.

Each outing we make seems to offer up a new species – but about a month ago we had a double pleasure. Cavorting along the branches of a couple of tall trees were no fewer than four Knysna loeries. Unlike in previous sightings, when we merely saw one or two fly past, this time we stood transfixed for about 10 minutes as they paraded their spectacular plumage in the early morning sunlight.

But Luke was troubled. His cousin Dylan – who is twice his age, lives in East London and has an encyclopedic knowledge of birds – recently introduced Luke to the *Roberts Multimedia Birds of Southern Africa* CD-Rom, wherein Southern Africa's birds are shown in video clips, with each call recorded as well. The bird-watcher's bible, they call it.

Anyway, a couple of outings with his cousin and a few hours spent browsing on the CD-Rom – not to mention regularly having his nose in that bird book – has equipped Luke with a growing ability to identify birds by their calls.

And yes, what he was hearing, he said to me in a conspiratorial David Attenborough whisper, was definitely the call of a black-headed oriole – which he had yet to see.

We followed the sound and there on a branch of the same tree as the loeries was a fine specimen, the identity of which he quickly confirmed with the aid of binoculars and his bird book.

Another "find" was the delightful little bar-throated apalis, two or three of which we watched for several minutes frolicking in a bushy thicket metres away from us.

Our most recent sighting was a flock of delightful little swee waxbills, with their distinctive red markings.

To see them in their natural habitat – chancing on them as we did – is an infinitely more exhilarating experience than to see them, say, in a cage at a zoo.

But Settlers Park isn't the only good place to see interesting birds.

We've had excellent results at Dodds Farm (further up the Baakens River), spotting several Egyptian geese, Cape weavers and numerous sunbirds.

But if you happen to live in an area with a reasonable number of trees, you're away.

Some of our most exciting "finds" have been made in our back garden, including a one-off sighting of a Burchell's coucal, which Luke miraculously managed to pinpoint in his book.

And the more we look, the more we see: European and red-winged starlings are in plentiful supply, as are Cape wagtails and the similar-looking fiscal shrike and fiscal flycatcher.

Then, of course, there's the beachfront, estuaries, mountains . . .

According to the Sasol book, there are more than 900 species of wild bird in southern Africa – and many of them are right on our doorstep.