

View from the Top

We watch from afar as the entire world once more plunges into insanity, where the whims of a dictator result in the deaths of innocents, and yet has drastic effects even upon the uninjured. Yet "little" South Africa will feel Putin's war in many ways, commencing in our pockets, and devolving into factionalisation of the national narrative.

Despite the fact that this newsletter is dedicated to our own (often neglected) natural heritage, we cannot remain silent, and realise that no-one may be neutral here – it is incumbent upon us all to oppose evil, and we are compelled to view the world we live in holistically. To allow this war is to tacitly overlook an assault on the entire integrated fabric of our planet.

And so it is that we recognise Anastasiia Yalanskaya, a young woman of Ukraine, who died while bringing food to hungry animals in a dog shelter. Reports indicate that there is no doubt that the vehicle was actively targeted, despite knowledge of the nature of the civilian occupants. Anastasiia died doing what we at Nature's Heart recognise and respect – she loved the animals and acted accordingly. We salute Anastasiia the true hero of a stupid war.
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Birding Plant of the Month

Forest Num-num (*Carissa bispinosa*)

This plant sounds as exotic as it looks. Yet it is a very common addition to gardens in KZN. In fact, it is considered endemic in many wooded areas throughout South Africa, albeit more so on the eastern parts, and not in areas of frost. It grows quickly, and is a smallish shrub that will suit gardens of townhouses. The big attraction is the white flowers of summer that bring insects and birds, and a pleasant fragrance. These lead to fruit that is human edible, and may be used to produce a marmalade.

This plant comes with two cautionaries:

It is not recommended if you are in an area where you wish to avoid monkeys – the fruit is a delicacy!

It also does have quite severe thorns!



Forest Num-num

Nature's Heart

Announcement 1:

Nature's Heart is sad to announce that Elaine's Birding have increased prices effective 1 March 2022. We are therefore providing increases in turn, that will be due 1 April 2022.

Announcement 2:

Nature's Heart is still operating in an environment of constrained supply, and our previous announcement of shipping delays of up to a week remain in operation. There will be no specials this month.

Bon Mots

"Compared to other things in the universe, we and the albatrosses are almost identical" – (Carl Safina)

Environmental Chirps

It is always exciting to see a new bird – particularly one that stimulates emotions! A confession – seeing a species that I have not seen before is becoming somewhat rarer. Also, I am not a "lister", and will not make great expense or travel large distances to see a new species. Instead I prefer, (along with my better half), to drink in the general environment particularly in our bushveld and lowveld, and take enjoyment even from those birds, mammals, insects and reptiles that we have seen many times before.

Yet we have never been on specific pelagic trips, and apart from the coastal seabirds, know very little of the many avian ocean dwellers that frequent our waters.

With that background, I also confess to never having observed an albatross, and ironically, it was a species that I was willing to travel in order to see. Needless to say, we joined the long-awaited Birdlife SA "Flock to Marion" trip with many other bird lovers.

Well! We did indeed see many pelagic birds. More specifically, we did see a number of albatross species.

That included the critically endangered Tristan albatross, and considering the remaining numbers of these birds it is actually a tragedy to say that we were privileged to see them. If anything, exposing the numbers of these creatures and the threats that face them confirms the damage that mankind has done and the need for even greater emphasis on the environmental activities needed to save them. And here I

interrupt to pay tribute to the many people who do care, and who are doing something positive to protect them. In particular we take note of the general efforts of Birdlife SA, and the particular work of the Albatross Task Force (incidentally, a very worthy cause if any readers have some spare cash to donate).

However, it is the far less threatened (yet still vulnerable) wandering albatross that truly captured my admiration. What a bird! One needs to consider the size of the animal, including the longest wingspan of any bird (3,5m), and weight of up to 30lbs. They are massive, and still they fly like no other bird one has ever seen. The only wing flapping occurs at take-off (after a feed), and overwhelmingly there is simply a graceful rotation of the outstretched wings to compensate direction changes or gusts of wind. It was a thrilling experience that I equate with my personal favourite bushveld raptor (the martial eagle). I have discovered that it is possible to catch these birds on a day trip from Cape Town, and I am actually interested to see them again on such a pelagic trip despite the weak sea-legs. For those readers who have not seen a wandering albatross - please make a point to add it to your bucket list.

A final note and finger to the many listers out there – do take a moment and actually enjoy these super birds! They are more than just a tick on a list...

Bird of the Month

Northern Giant Petrel (*Macronectes halli*)

It was not only albatrosses in the sky off Prince Edward Island. The bird of the month is a relatively unknown South African entrant – the Northern Giant Petrel. Despite being far smaller than the large albatrosses, this bird is still huge, with a wingspan of 2m. This specimen was captured 30 or 40m off our ship, and flew every bit as gracefully as the albatrosses. On a sad note, a favourite food is young albatrosses, but there is no doubt that this beauty also deserves a place in our hearts.

