

## Pratincole Ponderings

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The legendary Manchester

United manager Sir Alex Ferguson, a dour Glaswegian from the tough side of town coined the refrain 'Football, bloody hell...' to describe the unpredictability of the game and its propensity to create thrills... But he could just as easily have been talking about birding... because birds have wings and turn up unexpectedly where they are not supposed to, and thrill us birthing folk in the process.

I was part of the Soutpansberg Bird Festival in November 2006 when a very lost Rock Pratincole was found on Albasini Dam, with the nearest 'regular' haunt of this species the rocky sections of the Zambesi River, hundreds of kilometres to the north... Now that was a real bloody hell find!

But going even further back, my first ever trip to the Kruger National Park was in 1983, a year after my family had immigrated to South Africa from Northern Ireland. The addition was immediate, like thousands before and since... I was already keen on birds while still on Irish shores, so

Below Bloody hell! The Rock Pratincole at Albasini Dam in 2006.



experiencing the Park was a real bonus and the natural thing to embrace its birding was to get a field guide for the birds of Kruger, and engulf its contents. One of my school friends was also in a family of *Krugerholics* and we would always envy each other in sharing our special sightings with each other after returning from family trips to the Park. Although Kruger was miles away from our Johannesburg homes, we would test each other from the book, and soon knew all the birds found there, their distributions, status, habits and habitats.

And of almost mythical status was the appendix of vagrant species at the end. These species did not have any accompanying drawings and were birds that only had historic records, were dubious records

that still required verification, or were very recent species that had yet to establish a population. One of these species was what was then called the Red-winged Pratincole (now Collared Pratincole). The entry in that appendix said something like 'pair recently recorded at Engelhard Dam.'

In December 1985 my family were

spending a couple of nights at Olifants Rest Camp. A bird on the appendix list was never something I really considered would be see-able, so it was not on my target list. During our holiday we were driving along one of the *cul-de-sac* roads on the southern bank of Engelhard Dam between Olifants and Letaba Rest Camps, and the road ended in a turning circle around some short Kikuyu-like grass that almost resembled lawn and was strangely incongruous with normal Kruger earth. Imagine my elation when in the middle of the grass turning circle and in the veld on the outside of the road in the proximate area, were not one, or a pair, but eight Collared Pratincoles perched on the ground in a loose flock.





LEFT Black-winged Pratincole in the Limpopo Province © Derek Engelbrecht

but our sighting had made for a wonderful early Christmas present.

At the time of my December 1985 sighting I was far more familiar with the slightly less striking, and usu-

I did my best to persuade my family that this was much more magical than whatever large animals were in the Letaba River, and the pratincoles seemed strangely unperturbed by the passing vehicles and would not flush more than a few metres if cars got too close. We were able to watch them at close quarters and take in the jewel-like scarlet base to their bills, their pale buff throats framed with black collar, and when they arched their wings, their glorious russet-coloured underwings. We took some slide photos that sadly have not survived the transition to the digital era and been lost somewhere, but at the time I thought I had struck gold.

The next updated edition of that Kruger Bird Guide came out in 1987, and by then Collared Pratincole (still under their old name) had graduated to the main descriptions and had an accompanying painting,

ally collarless Black-winged Pratincole when in South Africa, which were regular in places in, or closer to Gauteng. These Letaba River pratincoles were my first Collareds, but just over a decade later when I began to work in the Park and would visit Engelhard with a fair deal of regularity, by then Collared Pratincoles had graduated to an uncommon but regular sighting along the Letaba River, and sometimes substantial numbers.

And they are no longer restricted to the Letaba River between Letaba and Ollifants Rest Camps, but are found all along the wetland vleisystem that runs from the Tropic of Capricorn Loop, through the Nshawu Pans, down towards the Letaba River. I'd also seen them at Twisappel, Grootvlei and Stapelkop Dams and, judging by the atlas sightings map, are now recorded regularly and entrenched as an annual breeding summer visitor to the Park.

Ironically, there are at least three records of Black-winged Pratincoles from Kruger too, and while I personally have not seen photographic evidence that these were not young collarless Collared Pratincoles seen in poor light, I am aware of one record of this usually more western species from a birder of some repute. So we can all safely assume that because pratincoles of both species are fairly nomadic and highly mobile, they probably have a relationship like Amur Falcons and Red-footed Falcons, where the latter will occasionally pitch up in flocks of the former within the Park, and indeed other parts of the country.

In January 2018 I spent a couple of days on a project in Mapungubwe National Park, and eagerly persuaded my colleague to take me to one of my favourite places, the hide at Maloutswa Pan in the Limpopo River floodplain in the

western section of that park. And to my delight there were two pratincoles on a sandbank south of the hide. They had no visible complete collar, and when I

watched them and eventually saw one flex its wings, it appeared to me that they had black underwings, but I could not be certain and the flex had been so fleeting that I could not be sure.

Both Black-winged and Collared Pratincole are on the Mapungubwe Bird Checklist on the SANParks' Website, the former described as a rare summer visitor, the latter with a status uncertain indicator. SABAP2 has a record of Collared Pratincole from the pentad Maloutswa Pan is in, and Black-winged Pratincole records from the two pentads immediately to the west of that pentad. Pratincoles are nomadic as has already been said, but whichever one of the two I saw, they always fill me with the elation one gets from birding... 'bloody hell!'



RIGHT A juvenile Collared Pratincole at the Nshawu Dams, Kruger National Park © Derek Engelbrecht