

Scrub robin continues to draw twitchers

KAREN WATKINS

A confused robin is the third largest twitch ever in southern African birding history.

Over 735 twitchers have seen the celebrity so far, and counting, some bunking work, others arriving in suits or heels.

The rufous-tailed scrub robin was first seen at Zeekoevlei Nature Reserve on Sunday July 17 by Claremont author Peter Steyn and Constantia doctor André Demblon ("Bird lovers in tizz over confused Robin," Bulletin July 12).

More than two weeks later it continues to be the centre of attention, drawing twitchers from all over.

It's a fitting celebration for South African Rare Bird News (SARBN) eighth birthday with its first report going out on 31 July 2008.

Trevor Hardaker, who compiles SARBN, is keeping a record of visitors who have seen the latest feathered celebrity, saying 594 are from the Western Cape followed by 113 from Gauteng.

Three twitchers apiece came from KwaZulu-Natal and Botswana, and one each from North West, Limpopo and Namibia. Eight came from the Eastern Cape – Stutterheim, Grahamstown, Graaff-Reinet and Port Elizabeth – and seven from the Free State with four from Mpumalanga.

On the SA Rare Birds Facebook page, Peter Sharland describes embarking on the Long Twitch from Punda Maria (Kruger National Park) for OR Tambo, blowing a gasket along the way. Arriving at Zeekoevlei, at 10am, they were initially frustrated until later in the day as the bird showed really well and cracking views and



The spotting of a rare bird a rufous-tailed scrub robin, pictured right, has caused a countrywide migration of twitchers to Zeekoevlei.



PICTURES: PETER RYAN

photos ensued.

Professor Peter Ryan of UCT's Percy FitzPatrick Institute of African Ornithology says the rufous-tailed scrub robin is most likely a "reverse migrant" – a bird that gets its heading out by 180 degrees.

"So instead of heading north from its wintering grounds in north Africa, it came south. It probably arrived in May or June, and was simply overlooked until Peter and Andre stumbled onto it," he said.

Asked what the triggers are for its future plans and if it could possibly mate with a local robin, Professor Ryan said chances were very slim indeed.

"The closest relative in the local area is the Karoo scrub robin, but there are none in the immediate vicinity of Zeekoevlei. If it isn't predated, it might hang around until September or October, when it

should head back to its wintering grounds," he said.

Asked about diet, he said these birds are generalists, taking a mix of inverts and fruits.

The first largest twitch goes to a Spotted Crake with 1 470 twitchers visiting the bird at Waterfall Estate in January 2016, present for 43 days.

Second place goes to a Snowy Egret with 1 110 twitchers visiting the Black River in June 2015, present for 24 days.

Another local sighting was the Little Crake, drawing 607 twitchers at Clovelly in March 2012, present for 13 days.

Mr Hardaker thanked everyone who had provided the information to keep SARBN up to date, the photos to illustrate the reports and the camaraderie on all the various twitches.

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