



MARK D. ANDERSON

IBA NEWSLETTER

Welcome to BirdLife South Africa's Spring 2012 Important Bird Areas newsletter. We send out two issues a year filled with stories, updates and everything else you need to know about conserving the most important sites in South Africa for our birds.

WATER GIVES LIFE

People are naturally drawn to water and, although that is largely driven by survival, humans' attraction to coastal water and inland lakes and rivers reflects the strong bond between people and nature, as well as the aesthetic appeal of waterbodies.

The Ramsar Convention broadly defines wetlands as including lakes and rivers, marshes, wet grasslands and peatlands, estuaries, deltas and tidal flats, near-shore marine areas, mangroves and coral reefs, and man-made sites such as fish ponds, reservoirs and salt pans. To avoid confusion, what we traditionally call wetlands (that is, areas comprising marshes, wet grasslands and peatlands) will be referred to as vleis.

The National Biodiversity Assessment for 2011 compiled by the South African National Biodiversity Institute (SANBI) identified these wetlands as the most important but also most threatened of our ecosystems, because 65 per cent of current vlei types are threatened – and we have already lost more than 50 per

cent of South Africa's original vlei area. At least 31 of the 124 South African Important Bird Areas (IBAs) include vlei areas.

Fortunately, vleis are more resilient than many other ecosystems and can be rehabilitated to at least a basic level of ecological and hydrological functioning. Given their strategic importance for ensuring water quality and regulating water supplies (also known as ecosystem services), investments in conserving, managing and restoring vleis are likely to generate disproportionately large returns (SANBI 2011).

South Africa has 291 estuaries covering about 90 000 hectares (or 170 000

Sites are designated as **Important Bird Areas** based on the significant presence of bird species that fall into one or more of the following criteria: threatened, restricted-range, biome-restricted and congregatory species. More than 300 of South Africa's bird species fall into one or more of these criteria, and they are then referred to as IBA trigger species.

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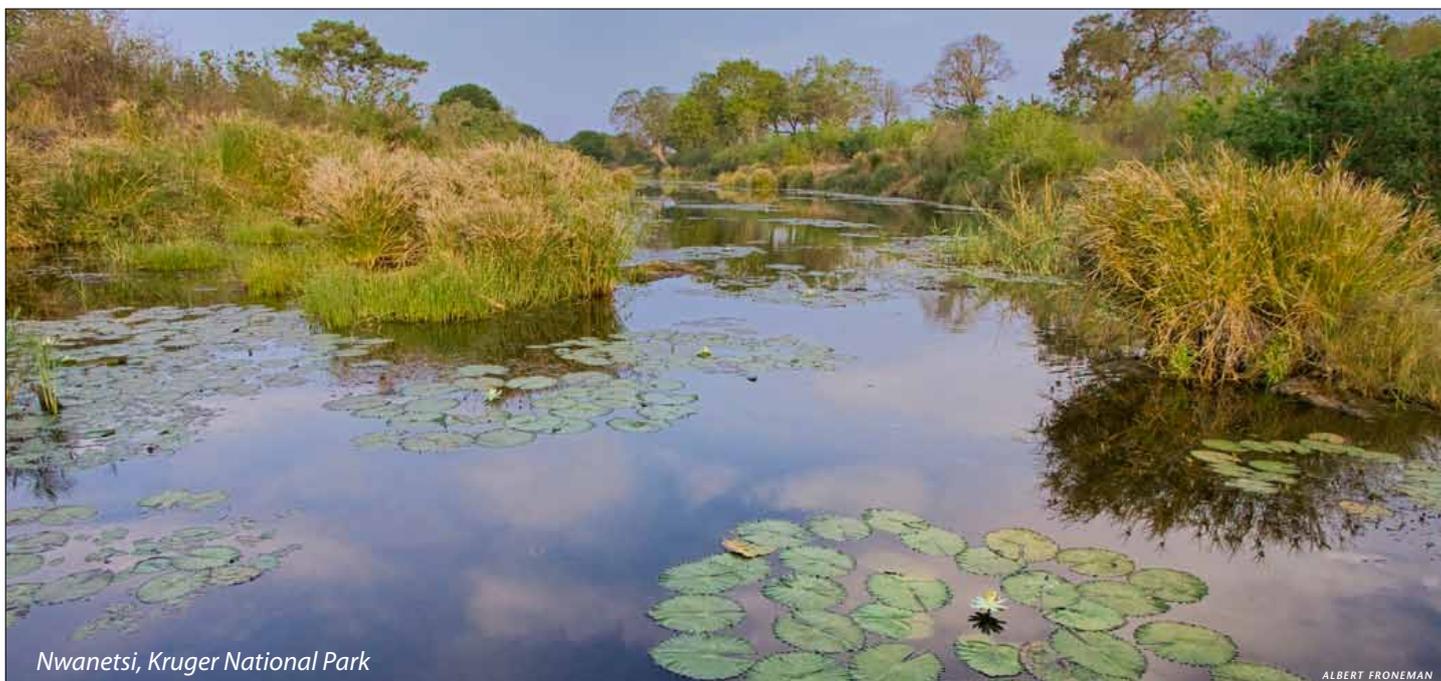
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hectares if the associated floodplains are included). There are estuaries in 15 of the country's IBAs.

The St Lucia Lake system, one of the priority IBAs, accounts for more than half of South Africa's estuarine area. This IBA has one of the longest avian trigger species lists of all the South African IBAs, with 72 species, including 18 threatened, 24 near-threatened, 19 biome-restricted and restricted-range, and 12 congregatory species. Unfortunately, St Lucia is currently in poor ecological condition as a result of its artificial separation from the uMfolozi River mouth, combined with the ongoing drought. This has caused the estuary to dry, and it is no longer able to fulfil its role as the most important nursery area for marine fish on the south-east African coastline. This has also affected the birdlife, and the



Nwanetsi, Kruger National Park

ALBERT FRONEMAN

numbers of many of the waders and congregatory species have reduced. We were therefore very pleased to learn that the authorities have recently attempted to reconnect the uMfolozi River and Lake St Lucia in a bid to restore the functioning of South Africa's largest estuarine system.

About 111 (90 per cent) of South Africa's 124 IBAs span important wetlands, including the estuaries and vleis mentioned above, plus rivers (69 IBAs), dams, lakes and pans (30 IBAs), while 15 IBAs act as important watersheds and 14 conserve coastlines. **Wetlands are critical for a variety of birds for feeding, breeding and roosting, which is why we have this close association between our IBAs and wetlands.**

What we hadn't properly appreciated, however, was how important our IBA network is for conserving the country's water ecosystems. Considering that waterbirds are good indicators of healthy ecosystems, we are certain that many of these wetlands in our IBAs are most likely ranked as high priority by SANBI. This is something we hope to establish in the near future.

What is without doubt is that by conserving habitats for birds we also make an important contribution to conserving South Africa's most scarce resource – water.

DANIEL MARNEWICK

Manager, Important Bird Areas Programme and Regional Conservation, BirdLife South Africa

Overview of the IBA Programme's Progress

Thus far, 2012 has been very successful. The IBA team has grown with the addition of Nick Theron as the Regional Conservation Manager (RCM) in KwaZulu-Natal, and Dale Wright as the RCM in the Western Cape ([read more...](#)). With six of our nine provinces' IBAs being conserved at ground level, we are pleased to confirm that the IBA Directory is fast moving from being a theoretical book to practical conservation.

The IBA RCMs and National Manager presented their posters at the Frontiers in South African Ornithology conference in Port Elizabeth during March. The IBA team learnt a lot and feel confident that the programme is aligned with avian research and heading in the right direction to conserve our birds. The team continues to make presentations at national and international conferences and meetings.

A focus for 2012 is ensuring that data related to IBAs are used as widely as possible. The IBA boundaries have been updated and loaded onto the website ([read more...](#)). All IBA texts have been uploaded to our online Important Bird Areas Directory, and we have 'partially' updated all 124 IBA texts ([read more...](#)). We are now busy 'fully' updating these texts as we assess each of the IBAs' current condition.

We have also been actively marketing the IBA Programme and launched the IBA Photo Competi-

tion in May this year, which came to a close on 15 October – we will be announcing winners shortly. We invited keen photographers to provide the IBA Programme with their best images of an IBA, be it of the species, habitat or people. From these we will develop an online IBA photo gallery. With the assistance of Image Works, we now have a five-minute IBA video clip for awareness and promotional purposes ([watch...](#)).

The only hope of safeguarding the 60 per cent of IBAs that are currently unprotected is through an innovative programme called Biodiversity Stewardship. Through partnerships between NGOs, provincial governments and private landowners, hundreds of thousands of hectares of land critical for biodiversity conservation can be protected.

The RCMs have been working hard to proclaim IBAs in Mpumalanga, Free State and KZN as either protected environments or nature reserves, and we intend doing this for even more, beginning soon in the Western Cape.

We would like to thank all the partners, birders, bird clubs, government departments and our funders who have supported the IBA programme. With the recently announced funding from Trecor and Mitsui & Co., 2013 will see us making even greater strides towards conserving our IBAs.

WATER & CLIMATE CHANGE

When it comes to the things without which humans cannot survive – water, air, food and shelter – it's clear that the value we attach to resources is directly related to their scarcity. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the value of water and wetlands in an otherwise arid country.

Running Namibia's national biodiversity and climate change programmes, my colleagues and I quickly realised how crucial that country's wetlands were. Fully 97 per cent of Namibia is semi-arid, arid or hyper-arid, with only three per cent classified as tropical sub-humid. No natural perennial rivers exist within its borders, and the catchments of its boundary rivers are controlled by neighbouring countries.

Pressure on South Africa's water and wetlands is no less severe. Government water supply/demand scenarios from 2000 (which don't even contain the words 'climate change') show a quarter of the country's water-management areas in shortage, a quarter in surplus, and half in balance; by 2025 the shortages are likely to have increased dramatically.

According to the National Wetlands Inventory, wetlands cover 19.7 million hectares of South Africa, or 15.3 per cent of its surface area, quite extraordinary figures. Yet in many centres desalination and effluent re-use are being considered due to the likelihood of water shortage. In this context, we can't be under any illusions that waterbirds will have an easy future.

The basic maths of climate change and waterbodies is pretty simple ... higher temperatures plus higher aridity equal higher evapotranspiration and lower water availability

The basic maths of climate change and waterbodies is pretty simple, even if modelling precise impacts is enormously complex: higher temperatures plus higher aridity equal higher evapotranspiration and lower water availability. Ephemeral or shallow wetlands and seeps in arid areas can be expected to experience lower frequencies of water availability as the century progresses. By contrast, eastern wetlands could experience more episodes of flooding and disturbance.

What can we do most effectively in the face of these rather daunting odds? **The blunt answers are: protection, education and reducing water waste.** Protection of IBAs and other critical wetlands; education of policymakers, planners, children and the public about ecosystem services and how water is a habitat for life and not simply a commodity for humans; and stopping massive leakages and

wasteful practices by human society. These are not silver bullets, but they will get us where we need to go, if we work hard and fast.

PHOEBE BARNARD

- Birds & Environmental Change Programme, Climate Change & BioAdaptation Division, South African National Biodiversity Institute (SANBI)
- Climate Change Vulnerability and Adaptation Programme, DST-NRF Centre of Excellence at the Percy FitzPatrick Institute of African Ornithology, University of Cape Town



Kgalagadi Transfrontier Park, Northern Cape, will get drier in the wake of climate change.

MARK D. ANDERSON



Lower Berg River Wetlands
IBA, Western Cape

DALE WRIGHT

IMPORTANT BIRD AREAS ARE CONSERVING WATER

South Africa's IBAs are principally concerned with conserving birds and their habitats. However, they also play a broader role by protecting ecosystems that provide essential goods and services to society. The provision and purification of fresh water are just two examples of these services.

In South Africa, 15 of our IBAs are key watersheds or catchments. The large mountain IBAs, such as those in the Magaliesberg, Natal Drakensberg and the Cape Fold Mountains, all act as catchments for rainfall and their ecological health is a key determinant in the supply of fresh water to the nation. *It is estimated that in the Western Cape, catchments with high densities of alien invasive vegetation or plantations supply 50 to 100 per cent less water than catchments comprising natural fynbos vegetation.* The wise management of our mountain IBAs therefore not only improves habitats for birds, but critically also allows the catchments to enhance their ecological functioning to sustainably supply downstream ecosystems – and millions of people – with fresh water.

A number of important wetlands and estuaries are designated as IBAs. *Wetlands are considered the most threatened habitat type in South Africa, as they are vulnerable to transformation for development.* In South Africa, a number of our wetland IBAs are also designated Ramsar sites. Such sites are wetlands of global importance with a focus on their wise use for the benefit of both people and the environment, underpinned by maintaining sustainable benefits to mankind from their use and conservation.

In this country IBA wetlands are often designated principally as a result of their importance as congregatory sites for waterbirds. By conserving the species and ecological functioning of a wetland, we ensure the provision of

by protecting and managing wetlands for the conservation of birds, we will protect other threatened biodiversity and allow these natural systems to filter and improve water quality for downstream users

benefits to society, an element that reinforces the link between Ramsar and BirdLife South Africa. Ecosystem services from wetlands include acting as buffers against floods, as natural water filters and providing important recreational spaces for society.

Every year BirdLife South Africa celebrates World Wetlands Day by engaging with local communities near priority IBA wetlands such as Chrissiesmeer and Wakkerstroom, and using environmental education to illustrate the importance of wetlands to these communities.

As with mountain catchments, by protecting and managing wetlands for the conservation of birds, we will protect other threatened biodiversity and allow these natural systems to filter and improve water quality for downstream users. With the natural disasters predicted to emanate from climate change, functioning wetlands will provide critical buffers to people living in vulnerable conditions.

DALE WRIGHT

Regional Conservation Manager: Western Cape, Important Bird Areas Programme, BirdLife South Africa

CWACing waterbirds in IBAs

Waterbirds, by definition, are associated with water and as such are dependent on wetlands. Wetlands take on many forms, from natural systems such as lakes, marshes and estuaries to man-made dams, reservoirs and wastewater treatment works. The mosaic of habitats provided by wetlands – open water, reedbeds, mud flats, shoreline and vegetated islands – are able to support many waterbird species which use them as places in which to feed, breed and/or roost.

Approximately 170 waterbird species (excluding vagrants, rarities, wagtails and domestic ducks) occur regularly in South Africa. Of these, approximately 50 species (30 per cent) are Palearctic migrants. The remainder are resident, and many of them move around locally in response to changing landscapes, rainfall and site conditions. Some, like the Greater and Lesser flamingos, and Southern Pochard, are intra-African migrants and travel between different regions within Africa at various times of the year.

The Coordinated Waterbird Counts (CWAC, <http://cwac.adu.org.za>)

Greater Flamingos at Langebaan Lagoon, West Coast National Park and Saldanha Bay Islands IBA, Western Cape.

programme was initiated by the Animal Demography Unit (ADU) in 1992 to monitor waterbird populations in South Africa. Without knowing which species occur at certain wetlands and in what numbers, we cannot effectively gauge the importance of wetlands for certain species, and that therefore limits our capabilities to protect and conserve these habitats for a unique group of birds.

Regular ongoing surveys, especially in the long term, also allow researchers and conservation managers to determine patterns of occurrence (i.e. seasonality), breeding and population trends. These provide valuable ecological information on which to base biodiversity and conservation plans. For waterbirds, most of which are highly mobile, it is often a network of wetlands that is important for their annual survival, rather than a single site, and this has implications at local, regional and global levels.

There are currently 172 registered CWAC sites in 62 of South Africa's 124 Important Bird Areas (IBAs). These 172 sites comprise 222 individual wetlands at which waterbird surveys are conducted at least every six months. Within the IBA network, wetlands can either comprise most of or the entire IBA (for example, Lake

Sibaya, Orange River wetlands, Nyl River floodplain) or form part of the IBA (for example, Langebaan Lagoon in the West Coast National Park or Loskop Dam in the Loskop Dam Nature Reserve). Linkages between wetlands in different IBAs are important for waterbirds, which is why monitoring the birds' status and occurrence is an important component of the IBA programme.

Being top predators in wetland systems, many waterbirds are good indicators of wetland health and/or water quality. Diving birds, such as grebes, kingfishers and cormorants, rely on fairly clear waters to find suitable prey, while herbivores such as the Yellow-billed Duck, Red-knobbed Coot and Common Moorhen play an important ecological role by utilising and recycling aquatic plants.

Waterbirds tell us many stories. Their movements and populations provide connections between regions, countries, different levels of management and between people. Ultimately, their survival is dependent on the availability and health of wetlands and wetland systems.

DOUG HAREBOTTLE

Project Manager, South African Bird Atlas Project 2, Animal Demography Unit, Department of Zoology, University of Cape Town



DOUG HAREBOTTLE

THE NAIROBI CONVENTION

Enhancing the protection of birds in the West Indian Ocean

The marine and coastal environment in the western Indian Ocean (WIO) supports, directly or indirectly, large numbers of people and is under increasing pressure from rapid population growth. Related threats, such as expanding coastal development, overfishing and the ever-present spectre of climate change, are also of concern. The Nairobi Convention, signed in 1985, is an agreement between the 10 mainland and island states bordering the WIO (Somalia, Kenya, Tanzania, Mozambique, South Africa, Reunion, Mauritius, the Comoros, Madagascar and the Seychelles) to provide a legal framework for the management, development and protection of the marine and coastal environment.

The convention includes a 'Protocol Concerning Protected Areas and Wild Fauna and Flora in the Eastern African Region', with lists of protected plant and animal species. Most of the birds originally listed were coastal forest species as these forests are relatively well known but also under increasing threat. Bizarrely, this fundamentally marine instrument had no seabirds listed, despite the WIO region having a high diversity of seabirds. The Nairobi Convention Secretariat contracted BirdLife International to update the list, working with governments, researchers and NGOs in all the countries involved to develop national reports on the status of birds in the marine and coastal environment in the WIO.



ROSS WANLESS

But the project is more than simply a listing exercise. It also aims to identify potential marine IBAs that could receive greater protection in the future. While some criteria for terrestrial IBA site selection apply to marine IBAs, BirdLife International has developed new approaches to identifying sites. These are seaward extensions from breeding colonies, to protect resting birds and species that forage close to their islands; open sea areas that are important for foraging; migration bottlenecks, such as headlands or straits through or around which large numbers of seabirds regularly move; and coastal congregations of non-breeding seabirds, which would include areas regularly used by moulting birds.

Marine IBAs have already been identified in Europe and New Zealand but work is still lacking in Africa, and this is what BirdLife International and its partners hope to address. The WIO project countries have so far only listed existing terrestrial IBAs for which seaward extensions may be appropriate, because the data to identify sites based on the other three approaches are deficient. Nevertheless, this is a good start for the broader marine IBA programme that we plan to roll out. The Nairobi Convention project provides a good platform from which to educate the countries in the region about the planned marine IBA project, as well as to obtain information from local research institutions about the important sites for seabirds.

CHRISTINA MOSELEY
Coastal Seabird Conservation Manager,
BirdLife South Africa

ROSS WANLESS
Seabird Division Manager, BirdLife South Africa



BEN LASCELLES

Left Crab Plovers are found throughout the WIO region and are listed in the revised priority list for the protocol.

Above The Masked Booby breeds in the Seychelles, Mauritius and Tanzania and is one of the species for which potential marine IBAs have been identified in the region.

IMPACT OF MINING ON WATERBIRDS and other IBA trigger species

In a recent media release, BirdLife South Africa urged government to offer equal recognition to food production, water security and the conservation of our cultural and natural heritage, especially when assessing mining applications. BirdLife South Africa is not opposed to all mining, but does object to unsustainable activities in inappropriate areas that will potentially negatively impact threatened and endemic bird species and their habitats.

Our country's birds are under severe pressure from mining. BirdLife South Africa doesn't have the capacity to actively comment on every development or mining application, so we use the Important Bird Areas (IBA) network to guide our participation in these. We encourage our bird clubs and regional conservation committees to do the same.

We hear a lot about acid mine drainage and other impacts of mining. But what does this mean for birds? Waterbirds are at the greatest risk from mining. Huge quantities of coal lie below ecologically sensitive wetlands, particularly in Mpumalanga. This province supports all five of South Africa's Critically Endangered bird species, including three wetland specialists: White-winged Flufftail, Wattled Crane and Eurasian Bittern. Two of the four remaining breeding pairs of Wattled Cranes in Mpumalanga may soon be displaced by mining. The most important wetland used by White-winged Flufftails may also be destroyed by mining in the near future.

However, the problem goes beyond this handful of species that are a heartbeat away from extinction. Of South Africa's 316 IBA bird trigger species, 141 are waterbird or terrestrial congregatory species. The majority (93.6 per cent) are waterbirds, and most are dependent on healthy wetlands. Furthermore, 31 (22 per cent) of these congregatory



Wattled Cranes

RUSSEL FRIEDMAN

species are on the South African Red Data List of threatened bird species. The impacts of mining could thus have devastating consequences for species survival.

The effects of mining on birds can be direct, indirect or cumulative. Direct consequences include the loss of species and changes in species composition, abundance and distribution. Direct repercussions also involve the loss, fragmentation and degradation of vegetation and ecosystems that provide habitat for birds; changes to available surface water resources; and soil, air, water, noise and light pollution.

Indirect effects encompass the introduction of invasive alien species; downstream deterioration of water flow and quality; eventual impacts on water resources from the leaching of pollutants through soils or waste; and increased human pressure on the

environment. The cumulative burdens of additional infrastructure and people, coupled with the number of mining operations in the area, greatly increase the impacts on birds.

Addressing the impact of mining on birds in our IBAs forms a large part of our regional conservation work. To develop capacity within the IBA Programme, we work closely with the BirdLife South Africa Advocacy Division. In June, two IBA Regional Conservation Managers attended an advocacy training workshop in Nairobi, Kenya, hosted by the BirdLife Africa Partnership Secretariat. This learning exchange has further strengthened our will and ability to fight to protect our IBAs from the impacts of inappropriate mining.

CHARMAINE UYS

Regional Conservation Manager: Mpumalanga & Free State, Important Bird Areas Programme, BirdLife South Africa

WATER, LIVELIHOODS and the role of IBAs

Many rural and peri-urban communities settled in and around IBAs rely heavily on the natural resources the sites contain for their daily survival. Whether it is grazing for livestock, firewood for warmth and cooking, medicinal plants, or rivers that supply water, functioning ecosystems provide security for communities. Where habitats such as mountain catchments, grasslands and wetlands become degraded, it is often these communities that are the first to be adversely affected.

Lake Sibaya in northern Zululand is an IBA that forms part of the most important wetland and estuarine system in South Africa: the Isimangaliso Wetland Park. Backed by sponsorship from Mr Price and Sasol, we are working with local guides to monitor the important bird species that occur there. At the same time, *BirdLife South Africa is assisting the guides to become ambassadors for the environment within their own communities.* One of the guides, Bheki Mbonambi, who also runs his own community tourism camp, understands the importance of conserving Lake Sibaya. 'Without the lake, the community will not have drinking water and other natural resources to survive. We need to ensure that these areas are protected and well managed for our future,' he says.

Bheki and the other guides are also keenly involved with the local schoolchildren in the villages, running environmental clubs and taking them birdwatching.

For many people, the natural environment also contributes to their local economy through tourism opportunities. For example, the community of Cata, situated at the base of the Amatola IBA in the Eastern Cape, is harnessing the tourism potential of a beautiful forest. BirdLife South Africa, with funding from the organisation Sustainable Rural Development in the Eastern Cape (SURUDEK), has helped capacitate the people of Cata through environmental, business and ecotourism training. They manage their own tourism products, such as the forest hiking trails, while emphasising the need to conserve key resources.

By supporting communities through initiatives such as these and developing a local concern and sustainable link between important resources and the people who rely directly on them, we hope to contribute to and invest in the conservation of IBAs.

NICK THERON

Regional Conservation Manager: KwaZulu-Natal, Important Bird Area Programme, BirdLife South Africa

HOW CAN YOU HELP?

The vision for our IBA Programme is to steer BirdLife South Africa's terrestrial conservation intervention work at a site level. To do so, we need your support.

You can assist us by making a donation directly into our bank account:

BirdLife South Africa
First National Bank
Randburg 254-005
Account No. 62067506281
Use the reference 'IBA'

For more information, please contact Daniel Marnewick:

E-mail iba@birdlife.org.za

A BIG THANK YOU

BirdLife South Africa's IBA work is supported by many generous donors, including:

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Knysna Toyota

AVIS

GRASSLANDS ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION PROJECT:



The IBA Programme held a very successful **IBA GOLF DAY** in October. The day raised substantial funds for the IBA Programme as well as increased its support base among major companies. We thank all our sponsors for the day: The IBA/Tee sponsors are **AVI Community Trust/Lavazza, Omnia, Assore** (each sponsoring three holes), **Wilmar Oils and Fats Africa, Sappi** (each sponsoring one hole); Prize sponsors are Chamberlains Hardware, Nikon, The Thornybush Collection, WedgeView Country House & Spa, Glendower, Lavazza, Louis Oosthuizen, Diemersfontien Wine, Eurolux, Pick n Pay, Golfer Club. We also thank Continental Outdoor Media for donating the banners and billboards, and the Royal Johannesburg & Kensington Golf Club for their excellent hosting. A big thanks to our Golf Day Patron, Louis Oosthuizen, who although he couldn't be there on the day, sent us a video feed to wish the players good luck.