

# BIRDING from the boardroom

TEXT & PHOTOGRAPHS **TANIA ANDERSON**

Bugs and birds, frogs and butterflies are some of the creatures you will find when coddiwompling through the Isdell House garden created for birds. This unusual garden, barely a year old, has blossomed into a home for a diversity of wildlife in Dunkeld West, one of Johannesburg's northern suburbs. In the hope that it will inspire the creation of many other indigenous bird gardens, **Tania Anderson** shares the story of how it was achieved.

**THE DREAM** of a new head office for BirdLife South Africa became a reality when Pamela and Neville Isdell, with their keen interest in conservation in southern Africa, provided much of the funding in 2014. In recognition of their major contribution to the project, BirdLife South Africa's new home is named in their honour. Since the move to Isdell House in August 2015, staff and visitors have watched as the building and its garden have developed into an ideal base for the important work of conserving the country's birds and their habitats.

To complement the energy- and water-efficient building, establishing an indigenous, water-wise garden for the birds was a given. The aim was to attract as many urban birds as possible to the 800-square-metre garden and to provide resources for them >

right, inset *The front section of Isdell House in October 2015, a month after the garden was planted.*

right *Front view of Isdell House in winter 2016, with aloes and Leonotis in bloom.*



**BEFORE**



**AFTER**



AFTER

BEFORE

above & above, middle *The conservation wing nearing completion in June 2015, and then flourishing in August 2016.*

top *Reconstruction in progress, March 2015.*

top, right *Francisco, Sibona and Bongo planting in August 2015.*

by creating a variety of different habitats that reflect some of the country's biomes or vegetation types, such as Highveld grassland, savanna, bushveld, forest and succulent Karoo. A large wetland was essential, as was a patch of indigenous lawn where events could be held and which would cater for those bird species that prefer short grass habitats. The large pergola, designed to provide a green buffer to reduce heat on the west-facing

walls and shade for the deck area, would also enable smaller birds to take shelter and nest in between the climbing plants.

While the building was being refurbished between February and July 2015, the garden layout and landscaping hardworks, designed by Stephanie Nel and Glenn Wagener of Landmark Studios, started to take shape; their work began in July 2015 and was completed by the beginning of August. Keith Nevin of Hard Landscapes Enterprises created the natural wetland in record time. Soil and garden bed preparation followed, efficiently carried out by Servest, and by the last week of August it was time to start planting...

BirdLife's finance and operations manager Fanie du Plessis and I were privileged to be able to select the plant species. Each had to be useful to birds as a direct or indirect source of food, be water thrifty, provide roosting and nesting opportunities, host butterflies and insects and be able to thrive in the Johannesburg climate. At the planting stage, I positioned the plants with the intention of achieving a vegetation cover and composition as close as possible to that of the particular habitat we were mimicking: Highveld grassland, savanna thornveld, dry and mesic bushveld thickets, woodland, succulent Karoo and aloe habitat, and a shrubby exclusion zone for the more secretive creatures.

We approached Linda de Luca of Random Harvest Indigenous Nursery for guidance and she generously decided to sponsor the vast majority of the plants. In appreciation, we named the garden the Random Harvest Nursery Indigenous Garden. Malcolm Hepplewhite of Witkoppen Wildflower Nursery donated specific plant species to plug any gaps, and Gretchen Grenville of Grow Wild, Johan and Annette Wentzel of Wildflower Wholesale Nursery and Callidendron Indigenous Nursery enabled us to complete our list of the more unusual species we were after, and more. Oscar Lockwood of Lifestyle Garden Centre provided Natal mahogany *Trichilia emetica* trees in indoor pots and some scarcer plant species for the rocky outcrop. Rand Water donated many bags of bark chips and nutshells for mulching, and grasses. In all, more than 2000 plants comprising some 220 species were bedded in.

To add some structure and facilities for relaxation and events, Godfrey Budler of GardenShop donated garden furniture and various containers for feature plants, including *Strelitzia juncea*, tree wisteria *Bolusanthus speciosus* and canary creeper *Senecio tamoides* to green the

western boundary wall. Pieter Janse van Rensburg of Inthaba Trees provided three large trees to add shade and immediate services for birds while the smaller trees mature. A bench positioned near the hypnotic wetland stream, flanked by the gorgeous-smelling blossoms of sage bush *Buddleja salviifolia*, allows for a brief escape from the smartphone-driven universe within which so many of us exist.

A little water goes a long way in this water-wise garden. Rainwater, harvested from the building's roof into two 5000-litre JoJo tanks, is used to top up the wetland and for the grassland areas. Drip irrigation, the most effective way to water as there is little evaporative loss, was installed in a few sections where some watering is required to establish trees and for the lawn and pergola-climbing plants. The drip-irrigation system is automated and is connected to a rain sensor that switches off the irrigation when rain is detected. The rest of the garden is hand-watered on occasion and we expect that by the end of the 2016/17 summer it will be sustained by rainfall only. Shredded sticks and organic material recycled during pre-construction garden clearing, bark chips, nutshells, leaves and grass cuttings mulch the soil, retaining moisture and deterring weeds. Organic kitchen waste is also composted for the garden.

Grassland forms the largest habitat. Mountain cabbage tree *Cussonia paniculata*, bushveld gardenia *Gardenia volkensii*, *Erythrina* species, squills *Merwillia* species, and *Bulbine* and *Asparagus* species grow between the grasses, which include Natal redbud *Melinis nerviglumis*, *Chloris guyana*, *Themeda triandra*, *Aristida junciformis* and *Panicum maximum*. The flowers of the grassland aloes, a few geophytes such as *Gladiolus crassifolius*, and a variety of small forbs of the daisy family Asteraceae punctuate the grassland with colour and provide food for insects.

The wetland features two pools linked by a stream within the grassland habitat. In the ponds and along the edges are a variety of sedges, bulrush *Typha capensis*, water parsnip *Berula erecta*, water lilies *Nymphaea* species, waterblommetjie *Aponogeton distachyos* and river star *Gomphostigma virgatum*. On the wetland slopes *Kniphofia* species, *Ornithogalum juncifolia*, blue stars *Aristea ecklonis*, misty plume bush *Tetradenia riparia*, *Crinum* species, *Dietes grandiflora*, *Crocasmia*, *Kyllinga alba* and a few grass



AFTER



BEFORE

species provide shelter and food for smaller creatures.

Two fever trees *Vachellia (Acacia) xanthophloea* are the focal point of the mesic thicket near the wetland, accompanied by river indigo *Indigofera jucunda*, waterberry *Syzygium cordatum*, cross berry *Grewia occidentalis*, *Buddleja* species and pride of De Kaap *Bauhinia galpinii*. The bushveld thickets feature several trees and shrubs such as wild peach *Kiggelaria africana* (a great host plant to the caterpillars of the *Acraea* butterflies), Natal bauhinia *Bauhinia natalensis*, dogwood *Rhamnus prinoides*, parsley tree *Heteromorpha trifoliata* and large heart-seed grass *Eragrostis superba*.

The savanna thornveld trees include the paperbark tree *Vachellia sieberiana*, wild pear *Dombeya* >

above *Wetland planting began in August 2015.*

top *End-of-winter wetland cover, August 2016.*

left *River indigo in flower.*



above Newly planted savanna thornveld, September 2015.

top Savanna thornveld, lush with seeding grasses, in February 2016.

below, left Woodland section almost completed.

below, right Woodland section covered by June 2016.

*rotundifolia* and the nectar-rich dwarf coral tree *Erythrina humeana*. Large shrubs with fruits that attract birds include buffalo thorn *Ziziphus mucronata*, bushveld blue bush *Diospyros lycioides* subsp. *guerkei*, blue guarri *Euclea crispata* and sandpaper raisin *Grewia flavescens*. The grass layer is planted with typical savanna grasses such as *Hyparrhenia*, *Eragrostis*, *Sporobolus* and *Digitaria*.

The woodland area has two sections: a forest edge and drier

woodland. Once fully grown, many small trees will form a closed canopy. Some of these trees are the tree fuchsia *Halleria lucida*, which is ideal for fruit-eating birds, nectar feeders and butterflies; umzimbeet *Millettia grandis*, which attracts butterflies; forest cabbage tree *Cussonia spicata*; and white pear *Apodytes dimidiata*, with red arils on its fruits that lure many birds. Curry bush *Hypericum revolutum*, a variety of *Plectranthus* and ribbon bush *Hypoestes aristata* form the undergrowth, together with scattered *Mackaya bella* and forest lilies *Veltheimia bracteata*. The drier section has honeysuckle tree *Turraea floribunda*, bladdernut *Diospyros whyteana*, peeling plane *Ochna serrulata*, common calpurnia *Calpurnia aurea* and yellow bauhinia *Bauhinia tomentosa*.

The arid succulent and aloe habitat boasts 14 aloe species, carion flower *Stapelia* species, vygies, a young shepherd's tree *Boscia albitrunca*, wild olive *Olea europaea* subsp. *africana*, jacket plum *Pappia capensis*, common spike thorn *Gymnosporia buxifolia* and an assortment of African daisies and gazanias.

Climbers scrambling for attention on the pergola include *Asparagus falcatus*, poison rope *Strophanthus speciosus*, traveler's joy *Clematis brachiata*, wild jasmine *Jasminum multipartitum* and the endangered, fly-pollinated White's ginger *Mondia whitei*, which does very well in the mild Johannesburg climate. Some of the more unusual indigenous species in the garden include a large-leaved rock fig *Ficus abutilifolia*, *Aloe peglerae*, bushveld crossandra *Crossandra greenstockii*, chocolate bush *Tetradostema physaloides*, gifbol *Ammocharis coranica*, *Haemanthus humilis*, *Schoenoxiphium lehmannii*, *Chasmatophyllum musculinum* and elephant toothpick *Sansevieria pearsonii*.

More than a dash of ticklist competition crept in as the staff recorded all the bird species seen in, around and flying over the garden during its first year. Of the 59 bird species observed, 35 make use of the garden. The sisal logs in a few large trees on the perimeter have been adopted by Crested Barbets and inspected by Green Wood-hoopoes and Black-collared Barbets for possible occupation this breeding season. Wattled Lapwings and Hadeda Ibises frequent the lawn and daily visits by a flock of 20 Bronze Manikins have rapidly reduced the abundance of grass seeds.

A pair of Speckled Mousebirds were the first to breed in the male yellowwood *Podocarpus latifolius* and soon thereafter Egyptian Geese invaded the owl box in a jacaranda on the pavement while

we were eagerly waiting for a pair of Spotted Eagle-Owls to move in. The entire brood of five ducklings made it safely to the wetland, following closely behind their vocal parents. For the first six weeks the militant mother goose ensured that staff and visitors tiptoed around her invisible duckling protection zone. Thereafter we continued tiptoeing along the paths to avoid the copious droppings! The goose family gorged themselves on *waterblommetjies*, water lilies, sedges and their all-time favourite, guinea grass seedlings. Needless to say, the wetland was soon enriched with nutrients and devoid of floating water plants. Now that the geese have moved off, a Black Sparrowhawk occasionally uses the wetland for drinking and bathing and we hope a Black-headed Heron will soon discover the indigenous fish.

Two novel reptile and insect 'hotels' provide shelter for the smaller wildlife, such as Cape dwarf geckos and four-striped mice. The wetland is home to banded tilapia and common river frogs, donated by Roger Ford and Mark and Christine Read. Four dragonfly and one damselfly species have been observed at the wetland, and 10 butterfly species in the garden. Only a few Parktown prawns, clearly not yet used to being confronted by screaming humans, have been seen out foraging for snails. This insect's unusual size, strength and vivid orange colouring have made it an urban legend. The folklore apparently started with April Fool's Day articles published by the Johannesburg newspaper *The Star*, which claimed that the Parktown prawn was the result of a genetic experiment by students from the University of the Witwatersrand in the 1960s. This explained the insects' sudden arrival in Johannesburg around that time. No doubt the Hadedas would really appreciate seeing more of them.



The reptile and insect hotel (above) and five Egyptian Goose chicks at the wetland (above, right).



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- EcoSolutions (owl boxes) [www.ecosolutions.co.za](http://www.ecosolutions.co.za); [info@ecosolutions.co.za](mailto:info@ecosolutions.co.za)
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Were it not for the generous assistance, donations, sponsorships and many hours of hard work by BirdLife South Africa's partners and volunteers, Isdell House would be a shadow of what it is today. In addition to the nurseries and suppliers already mentioned, our grateful appreciation goes to Controlled Irrigation, Barbara and Chris Cory, and Culterra. For plant donations we thank Judith Hawarden, Manie van der Schijff Botanical Gardens (University of Pretoria), Yvonne Pennington, Linda Roux, Nicolette Sallie, Linda Schonegevel, Nicola Stewart Hohne, Willene van der Merwe and Wits Bird Club for donating and planting aloes and shrubs on Arbor Day. Thanks to Joshua Chimaliro and Irvin Mazibuko for general garden maintenance.

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