

A fan of our feathered friends

KAREN KOTZE

After this one, I'm klaar," declares Ian Sinclair. He's referring to the fourth – and final – revise of his international best-seller, *Sasol Birds of Southern Africa*.

His physical address states Pinelands, indeed his spacious and elegant home is in Pinelands, but the man himself rarely is. As this is written, he's hunting 30 endemic birds of Sri Lanka which are rumoured to be there, but have not yet been seen. Half a dozen of them are nocturnal too, so he paints quite a picture of a "Saucepan Man" version of himself, strung with torches, Canon equipment and flanked by fellow explorers, creeping through thickets in the deep dark night.

It's a bit of a feathered treasure hunt, but as an author of 30 books on birding, he's certainly the man for the task at hand.

After that, he's flying out to Colombia in search of more.

Is this nectar to a man whose life revolves around our feathered friends?

"I actually hate birds," he says, straight-faced. I roar with laughter. He says it was hooliganism that got him started on the life he now leads – more laughter – and he launches into a description of himself as a youngster faced with one of two hobbies, stamp collecting (he raises an eyebrow) and collecting bird eggs.

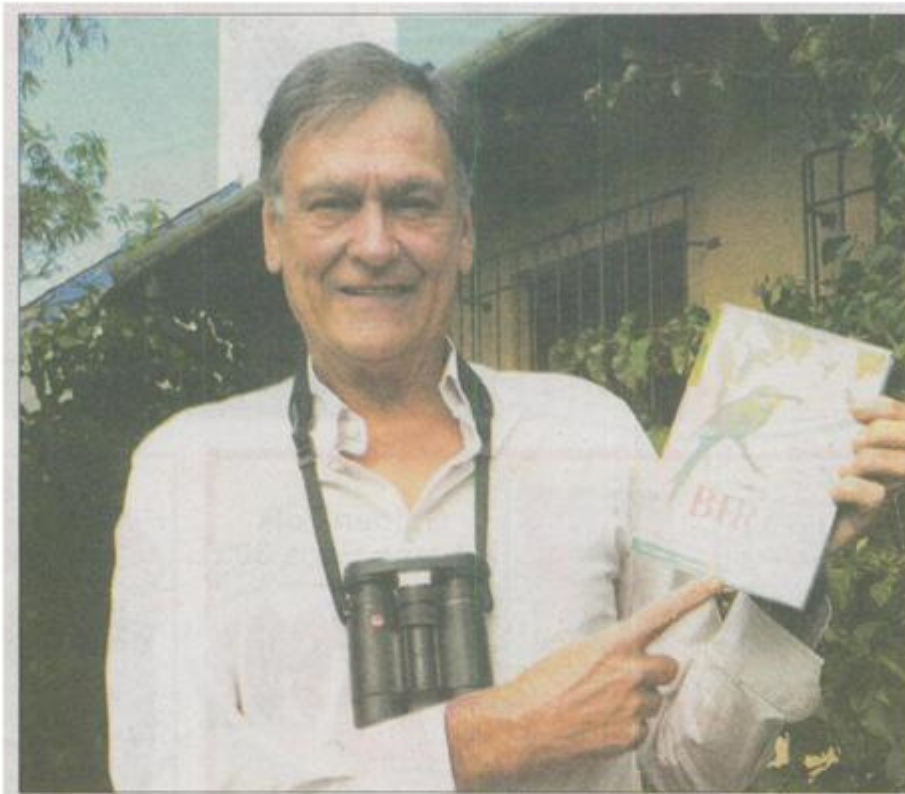
He claims to have done both. "Problem is, I kept on with the egg collecting long after my mates discovered women."

He says the hobby captured his curiosity. "You start off just collecting eggs, then you can't help but notice the difference in them, and then you're looking at the birds, noticing their calls, their colours, their differences, that sort of thing."

"That sort of thing" has paid for the fire-red Porsche in his driveway and is reflected in a pile of papers on a desk that bear details of his royalty cheques. He has to concede, tongue in cheek, that it's not a bad life.

Don't be fooled by the light-heartedness and sense of fun, this is a man who has, um, pecked away at his craft for a lifetime.

"I write like I speak, and it's apparently a nightmare for my editors, but



PICTURE: KAREN KOTZE

■ Ian Sinclair with his newly released illustrated field guide.

they humour me and people seem to like it well enough."

The re-launch of this book, lauded by avid birders the world over, set the circle aflutter with excitement. "Can you believe I missed the actual launch in Cape Town," he groans. "Sick, out cold, dreadful flu."

He has only good things to say about the finished edition and the incredible amount of work put into it by the team, with special mention of the artistry. "Photographs are inferior to such quality artwork," he says, whipping out a book from his library to show the quality difference. "Light is crucial to the photographs but the artist's illustrations are in perfect detail."

I pick up a book on New Zealand birds, and am surprised to learn that there are six different kinds of Kiwi. The birds, that is.

Mr Sinclair's face lights up when he speaks about certain areas and the oddities one can find in them which delight the birding world.

There are oddities in the birding

world peculiar to specific areas and he tells stories about trips through the Karoo and areas like Camdeboo with equal relish as far-flung places.

A peek about his very leafy piece of suburbia reveals no bird enticing gadgets. "I know people the world over feed birds to attract them, but often this causes a steep increase in the birds' breeding habits. Which is fine if its maintained, but if the feeds aren't kept up it simply kills the new population explosion, so I don't do that," he says.

He says the interest in bird watching is growing among the younger generation who are not just tweeting but starting to twitch too – that is – post sightings of very rare birds.

Not counting what he may or may not see on this trip, Mr Sinclair can say that of the 10 000 bird species that exist, he has seen 8 000.

Seemingly unable to help himself, he is considering a book of anecdotes of his travels in search of various birds to research. If they roll off the page like they do off his tongue I'll be first in line for a copy. His love of the Afrikaans names for birds over the English version is refreshing. "The Afrikaans names are so richly descriptive," he says. I understand why he relates to that.

But the anecdotes may have to wait just a while. He already has two other books quietly waiting to take wing.

Sasol Birds of Southern Africa

Ian Sinclair, Phil Hockey, Warwick Turboton, Peter Ryan

Illustrations: Norman Arlott and Peter Hayman

Struik Nature

Review: Brian Joss

Twitchers will chirp in delight when they get their hands on the newest edition of one of the best-selling bird guides on the African continent.

The editorial team has a wealth of experience in the field; Ian Sinclair is recognised as one of Africa's foremost birders; Phil Hockey and Peter Ryan are Director and Associate Professor of the Percy Fitzpatrick Institute of Ornithology at UCT respectively and Warwick Turboton is a well-known bird expert and writer.

Sasol Birds of Southern Africa was first published in 1993 and this, the fourth edition, has been extensively rewritten and greatly improved and it's also much easier to navigate.

Some of the changes are: Species accounts have been rewritten; plates have been newly designed to make comparisons easier; distribution maps have been updated; calendar bars show the occurrence of species and there are sonograms depicting the calls of difficult-to-distinguish birds.

There is not a lot of jargon and it is written in plain English but if you don't understand all the words there is a comprehensive glossary as well as an illustrated one which will help you to understand features and parts of a bird.

It covers the whole gamut of birds from Albatrosses (mollymawks and the sooty albatross are just two) to the Wryneck and species in between.

And if you think pigeons are all the same, think again.

There's the African Green; Delegorgue's; Feral and Speckled, to name some.

Sasol Birds of Southern Africa is highly recommended for the novice and expert alike.

And if you buy a copy you can join BirdLife South Africa at a discounted membership fee and you can help to save some birds that are threatened with extinction including the African Penguin, Ludwig's Bustard, the Cape Parrot and many others.

And if you want to join a bird club visit www.birdlife.org.za to find one near you.

It is also available in Afrikaans as *Sasol Voëls van Suider-Afrika: Vierde uitgawe*.

