



safe  
in  
suburbia

Korsman Bird Sanctuary

TEXT JAN DE BEER

Right in the middle of a residential area and close to an industrial hub in Benoni lies Korsman Bird Sanctuary, a unique and flourishing nature reserve that the much-mocked East Rand city can be proud of.



WARREN LAMONT

**K**orsman Bird Sanctuary is different. It's located not in the peace and quiet of the bush, but in the affluent suburb of Westdene in Benoni. The 50-hectare haven, with its 35-hectare pan, is encircled by a road called The Drive, where families rely on security booms and patrol cars for safe living. But in the fenced-off pan overlooked by their smart houses, about 150 bird species survive in suburbia without fear. And they do so thanks to a handful of committed custodians, the passionate

and dedicated environmentalists of the Korsman Conservancy.

The first move to protect this special pan came in the 1950s when Nic Korsman, a Benoni city councillor who lived in Westdene, was concerned about the many waterbirds being killed by dogs. He successfully started a municipal project to erect a fence around the pan, which was then named after him. At the time, the municipality introduced wild animals such as zebra and buck, but overgrazing and high water levels led to this

terrestrial wildlife being removed in the 1990s. Today the Korsman Sanctuary still belongs to the Ekurhuleni Metropolitan Municipality, but since the 1980s it has been managed by volunteer groups.

The current group, the non-profit-making Korsman Conservancy, has as its mission statement 'To create an indigenous park environment for recreational and educational purposes focusing on children, walkers, cyclists, families, whilst restoring, protecting and enhancing the natural beauty of Korsman Bird Sanctuary and surrounding area.'

When it comes to 'restoring and protecting', it's a mission that calls for much more than subscriptions and tea-and-cake meetings. Preserving a bird sanctuary needs in-depth knowledge of the daily and seasonal needs of its various inhabitants, as well as ongoing research into what will keep them happy. And with a municipality increasingly involved with political issues and suffering from a lack of funds, keeping the sanctuary alive calls for a conservancy with members prepared to get their hands dirty, as well as strong and astute leadership.

In the latter respect, the conservancy is fortunate to have Jane Trembath as its chairperson. Jane is a pioneering female long-haul captain for SAA, so taking control and being alert come naturally to her. When not flying Airbus 340s, she can be seen cycling, repeatedly, the 2.5 kilometres around Korsman. In fact, her quest for fitness is so intertwined with patrolling the pan that it's hard to say which comes first. A skilled communicator, she also knows how to deal with people, be they volunteers, municipal officials or members of the local community. It's a talent that has often proved to be invaluable.

For a bird sanctuary set in a city and managed by volunteers who virtually had to learn on the job, Korsman has recorded some amazing success stories. Perhaps one of the most noteworthy – and rewarding – achievements is that the sanctuary seems to have become the preferred nesting site of a pair of Goliath Herons, the largest of the heron species.

The pair's first nest was built at Korsman in 2016 and the following year the herons bred again, this time in a more conspicuous clump of sedge and closer



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to The Drive. Being in the right place at the right time, members of Korsman Conservancy saw what many veteran birdwatchers and professional conservationists have never observed: the gathering of long twigs to build the nest, the birds' courtship rituals with heads raised heavenward on the approved nest, the four-week incubation – and eventually that triumphant moment when the on-duty parent stood up on the nest to reveal the arrival of new life. The two hatchlings survived, and last year a spruced-up version of the same visible nest produced another three.

left *Three Goliath Heron chicks wait on the nest while a parent (above) goes on the hunt for lunch.*

opposite, above *African Swamphens revel in the surrounds of the pan.*

opposite, below *Korsman Bird Sanctuary is positioned in the midst of busy suburbia.*

The breeding of Goliath Herons is one of nature's closely guarded secrets and usually takes place in inaccessible areas of bush, so it was no surprise when Jane Trembath's 2017 video recording of the >



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above A Bar-tailed Godwit spent five weeks at Korsman in 2017 after a marathon flight.

top Flamingos make regular – characteristically unscheduled – appearances at Korsman Bird Sanctuary.

opposite, above Controlling the growth of vegetation ensures that the pan is kept open.

opposite, below New grazing after grassland burning has been life-saving for Spur-winged Geese at Korsman.

In recent years, some extremely unusual birds have called at the pan. One that hit press headlines when it arrived for an exciting five-week sojourn in October 2017 was a Bar-tailed Godwit. This marathon-flying species tends to pop up at coastal rather than inland sites in South Africa, and even there are not seen all that often. Bar-tailed Godwits are renowned for flying 11 000 kilometres nonstop from Arctic winters to sunny African coastlines, their amazing journeys proved by satellite tracking. As the news of Korsman's godwit spread, birders arrived at the pan from far and wide – even other provinces. In June 2014, the arrival of a Lesser Black-backed Gull also drew excited birders, some of whom flew in from Cape Town for a precious 'lifer'.

The arrival of both Lesser and Greater flamingos always means instant joyful postings on the Korsman WhatsApp and in 2016 dozens were reported on site daily for a prolonged spell. They still arrive regularly for spectacular impromptu meetings but, typically, cannot be relied on to make scheduled appearances. During the summer months, large mixed flocks of swallows stream in to Korsman to roost in the reedbeds just before sunset. Barn, White-throated, Greater Striped and Lesser Striped are prominent among the species.

When it comes to getting their hands dirty and maintaining and improving the sanctuary's habitat for birds, members of the Korsman Conservancy face a number of challenges. These include the removal of encroaching reeds and bulrushes which, if allowed to flourish, would make it difficult to spot even a tall heron in the pan. In the past the Ekurhuleni Metropolitan Municipality helped with spraying the reeds, but its resources are limited. By flooding and cutting – with the assistance of innovative home-made pontoons – the conservancy team has been able to open up the pan to avian visitors.

Eradicating invasive alien vegetation is another task undertaken by the team, resulting in a substantial increase in habitat for the birds at Korsman. Helmeted Guineafowl are again using ground nests they had abandoned when the nests were overgrown by spiky spear thistles, while the removal of thousands of American

chicks being fed was aired on national television by the respected wildlife programme 50/50 (the clip can be viewed on YouTube).

So however invasive – and, from a conservation point of view, unwelcome – the large population of enormous carp in the pan may be, to Goliath Herons this is clearly convenience fast food geared to raising families. Black-headed and Grey herons have also nested at the sanctuary, which now seems to have become a nursery destination for the heron family.



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ash saplings has led to the restoration of natural grassland.

Keeping grassland in check by burning is a challenge in view of Korsman's urban location, but in 2015 Jane and her started a burning regime in grassland that had not seen fire for decades. Thanks to meticulous planning and precautions, the burning not only has been safe, but has proved immensely successful. The regeneration of essential grazing land has been a life-saver for Spur-winged Geese, which starved in large numbers when, during their winter moulting migration to Korsman, their feather loss meant they could not fly to find grazing. The burning programme has now covered the entire area of the sanctuary and it is planned that sections will be burnt in a three-year rotation in future.

Another major challenge is that of litter. The pan attracts large numbers of pedestrians who use the circular road for hiking and the wide grassed verges next to the fence for picnics and get-togethers. Where there are people there's litter and, although bins are provided, a lot of trash – including lethal plastic items – ends up in the sanctuary. Even more reaches



ALBERT FRONEMAN

the pan via the municipal storm-water system. This calls for regular litter removal days, which are organised by the conservancy. Local schools sometimes participate, giving pupils an opportunity to learn about the merits of conservation.

The conservancy has arranged for owl boxes and bat hotels to be installed and for viewing berms to be erected around the

perimeter of the sanctuary. It has also put up noticeboards that list species to look out for and has strategically placed logs in the water near the fence to improve viewing and photographic opportunities.

Life at Korsman looks so good to birds that alien species such as Mandarin Duck and other 'domesticated' waterbirds are sometimes spotted in the pan. More >



MARIETJIE FRONEMAN



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above *The removal of rampant spiky spear thistles has freed up nesting areas for Helmeted Guineafowl.*

top *Korsman Bird Sanctuary is a favourite site for White-faced Ducks.*

ominously, a pair of Australian Black Swans that escaped from captivity has nested at Korsman for the past two years. Although ostensibly serene and graceful, swans are aggressively territorial birds and the Korsman Conservancy has called on the Gauteng Department of Agricultural and Rural Development to develop a plan to capture and relocate these birds humanely.

A few years ago Korsman welcomed four abandoned Grey-headed Gull chicks that had been raised in Johannesburg by Michelle Watson of the Friends of Free Wildlife organisation. While being raised, the chicks were not exposed to humans so that they would identify with gulls when meeting a wild flock. After a long search for a new home for her gulls, Michelle heard of Korsman and its prolific Grey-headed Gull population. When her young gulls were released at the pan, their very first flight took them straight to a welcoming flock in the middle of Korsman: a beautiful 'Born Free moment'.

Unlike many other bird sanctuaries, Korsman has to be self-sufficient and raise its own finances, for example to buy equipment and pay labourers involved in the upkeep of the reserve. Membership of the conservancy needs to increase, as does the community funding of day-to-day operations. The mechanical removal of reeds requires additional financial support, while high on the conservancy's priority list for the future is to attract sponsorship for a new bird hide at Korsman to replace the one destroyed by arsonists in 2011.

The conservancy is also hoping to attract more interest and greater participation in the preservation of the reserve from property owners living in the area, whose commitment to the cause has so far been limited.

Locally and nationally, the Korsman Sanctuary is gradually attracting more attention. In the new travel book *Secret Johannesburg* it is listed as one of the few tourist attractions in the East Rand, and in 2017 the Korsman Conservancy was placed among the top five finalists in the Eco-Community category of the *Encyclopedia Ecologic Awards*.

More recently, the conservancy won the SANParks 2018 Kudu Award in the 'Community Contribution: Non-profit-making Institutions' category. The award recognises the Korsman Conservancy's commitment to environmental stewardship through its removal of invasive vegetation, its ecological burning programme and its prevention of sewage spills into the water.

The pan is also gaining a reputation among photographers, as its circular shape gives them an abundance of angles, with quality lighting in both morning and afternoon, as well as waders often conveniently close to the fence. ♦