Birds Are Everywhere… If You’re Paying Attention!

I think one of the funniest things about being a birder is that we never really switch off. No matter where we are, what we're doing, or how busy our day might be, there's always a little part of us listening for a familiar call or keeping an eye on the trees. And sometimes, it's in the most unexpected places that we have our best birding moments.

Wednesday, the 4th of November, was voting day here in South Africa, and with it came a public holiday and plenty of people heading off to their local voting stations. I hope everyone who was eligible managed to cast their vote! But, without getting into politics, I want to share something that gave me a good laugh that morning.

Before I'd even left home, messages were already coming through on our SnA Youth Birders WhatsApp group. Members were sharing their eBird checklists from their voting stations, recording the birds they were seeing and hearing while standing in the queues. Some had even rather appropriately named their checklists "Voting"!

I couldn't help but laugh. Only birders would turn a trip to the voting station into an opportunity to record a few more species!

Of course, when it was my turn to head off and vote, I found myself doing exactly the same thing.

There I was, standing in the queue with everyone else, waiting patiently in the sun. Most people were chatting, scrolling through their phones, or simply keeping an eye on how quickly the queue was moving. Meanwhile, I had my head tilted backwards, staring into the trees above us.

And why? Well, because there was a beautiful Diederik Cuckoo calling from somewhere in the branches!

For anyone familiar with these cuckoos, you'll know just how distinctive their calls are. It's one of those sounds that immediately catches your attention, and once you've heard it, you can't help but try to find the bird responsible. There were two of them calling to one another and moving about in the trees, and I was completely captivated.

By this point, my neck was starting to get rather sore from looking up for so long, but there was absolutely no way I was going to ignore them!

What made the experience even funnier was looking around at the people standing near me. Everyone was there for the same reason, but we were clearly experiencing the wait a little differently. While most people were focused on getting through the queue, I was watching the trees and listening to cuckoos.

And then I noticed something else. I wasn't the only one looking up!

A few other heads were tilted towards the branches, and I had to wonder whether I'd found some fellow birders in the queue. It's quite funny how easily we can sometimes recognise one another. You don't necessarily need binoculars around your neck or a camera over your

shoulder. Sometimes all it takes is someone stopping mid-conversation because they've heard a bird calling.

It got me thinking about how birding really isn't something that needs a special outing, a nature reserve, or even a pair of binoculars. It's something that can happen absolutely anywhere.

Some of my favourite examples are when I'm out on training cycles with my dad. We're obviously out there to cycle, not to go birding, but that doesn't mean the birds stop being part of the experience. We regularly have African Fish Eagles flying overhead, and hearing that unmistakable call while we're out riding is always something special.

And that's what I love so much about birding. It becomes part of the way you experience everyday life.

A trip to the shops, a walk around the block, or even sitting in the garden can offer an unexpected birding moment. You don't have to be actively searching for birds either. Sometimes it's simply recognising a call in the background, noticing a shadow passing overhead, or catching a flash of colour in a nearby tree.

I think we sometimes forget just how much birdlife surrounds us, particularly when it comes to the species we see every day. Not every encounter needs to involve something rare or unusual to be worth appreciating.

So, whether you're standing in a voting queue, out on your morning cycle, or simply going about your day, take a moment to look up and listen. You might be surprised by what's happening around you.

Because sometimes the best birding moments aren't the ones we plan for. They're the ones that find us when we least expect them.