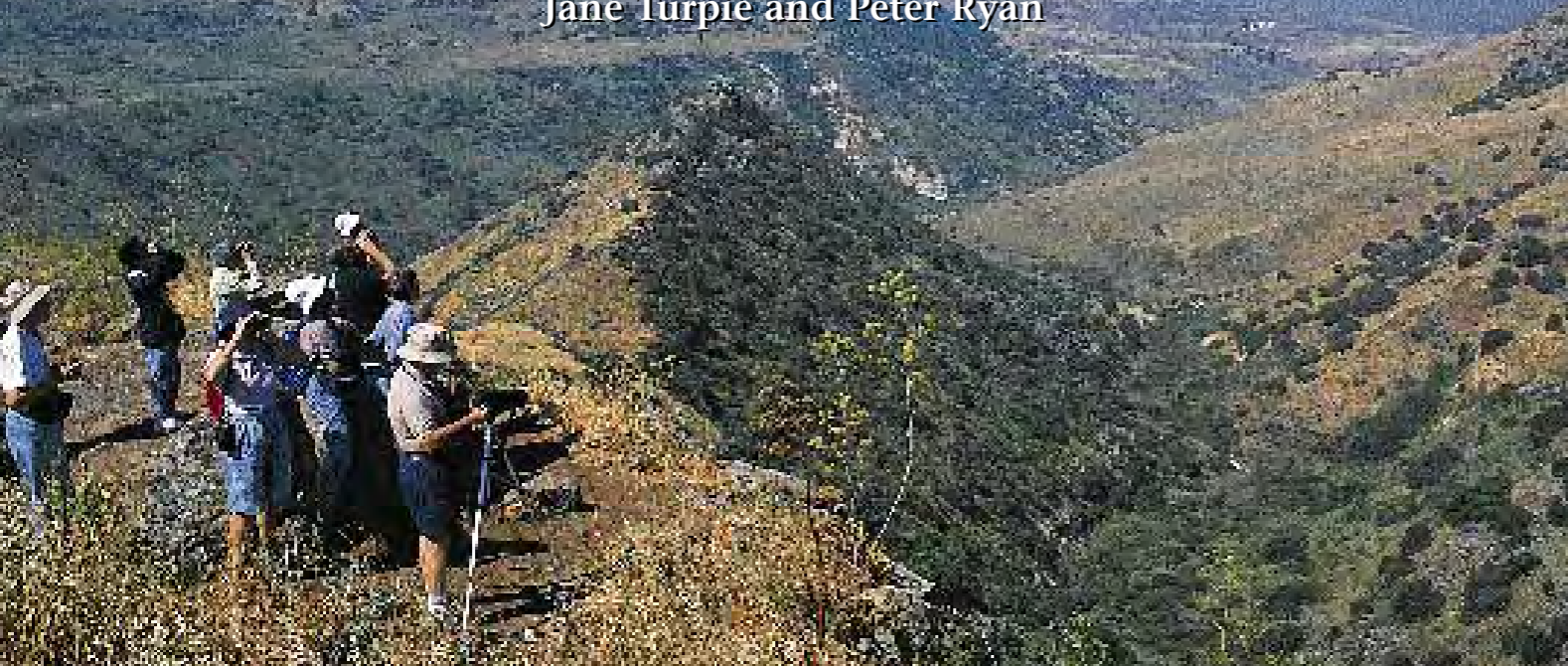


WHAT ARE BIRDERS WORTH?

The value of birding in South Africa

Jane Turpie and Peter Ryan



BRENDAN RYAN

South Africans tend to make little use of tours abroad, such as this one to Israel, but those who do, generally see far more species than self-guided travellers.

*Ever wondered how many birders there are in South Africa, or how much time, effort and money fanatical twitchers and more casual observers spend on their hobby? In an attempt to describe the nature and value of birding in South Africa, we asked readers of *Africa – Birds & Birding* to describe their birding activities. More than 500 people responded, and here we report some of the results of the survey...*

We all know that interest in birds has grown over the last few decades. Bookshop shelves overflow with new bird books, whereas 20 years ago there were only one or two. And it's not just armchair birders that are on the increase; you're much more likely to bump into another group of birders today than was the case even 10 years ago. But how important is birding on a national scale? This may seem like a frivolous question, but it is important to know the answer if you want to win the support of potential sponsors, and it was with this in mind that BirdLife South Africa asked us to estimate the importance and value of birding in South Africa.

HOW BIG IS BIRDING IN SOUTH AFRICA?

Possibly the most challenging problem was estimating how many birders there are in South Africa – how often does one have to look at birds

to be considered a birder? Many thousands of South Africans consciously enjoy having birds around them without being concerned with naming or understanding them. We decided that, although acknowledging their existence, we would exclude such 'passive' birders from our assessment. We restricted the analysis to 'active' birders, defined as people who invest some effort in getting to know their birds and who usually own birding equipment.

But it's hard to draw the exact boundary between active and passive birders, and there are various degrees of active birding. We asked people to place themselves into one of three classes: fanatical birders, who spend most of their spare time birding; enthusiastic birders, who regularly make an effort to go on birding trips; and casual birders, who enjoy watching birds when out gardening, hiking or visiting game reserves and the like. As it turned out, these three categories of birders differed quite markedly in terms of their activity and expenditure patterns, as well as their experience.

In order to estimate the entire active birding population, we had to know the relative proportions of different types of birders in the country. Because the questionnaire was more likely to reach and elicit responses from the keen birders, we also conducted a field survey, which found significantly more casual birders than those who

responded to the questionnaire. Given the proportion of people surveyed who were members of BirdLife South Africa (a pool of some 5 300 people) or who read *Africa – Birds & Birding* (about 12 000 magazines, each read by 2.5 people, suggesting a total readership of about 30 000), we estimated the active birding population in South Africa to be between 11 400 and 21 200. Of these, about 2% (up to 400) could be considered fanatical, 41% (up to 8 700) are enthusiastic and the remainder (57%, or up to 12 100) are casual birders. These figures may be conservative: an average of almost 60 000 southern African field guides (*Newman's*, *Roberts'*, *Sasol* and *Sinclair*) are sold each year.

Even so, the numbers of birders in South Africa are relatively small when compared with those in the developed countries in the Northern Hemisphere. While one in about 2 300 South Africans is an active birder, this is less than a tenth of the ratio in the United States, where a staggering one in 255 citizens is estimated to be an active birder.

WHO ARE SOUTH AFRICA'S BIRDERS?

Nearly two-thirds of birders are men, and half are between 40 and 60 years old. About 70% of respondents were working or homemakers, and only 22% were retired. So birding is no longer the domain of little old ladies, although women are better represented than in many other South African outdoor pursuits. While there is plenty of evidence that eccentrics still abound in this sport, birding is definitely starting to be more generally appealing and is even considered a cool thing to do among the younger generation. As is the case in America and Europe, South African birders tend to be highly educated, with an average of 15 years of education, and are pretty well-off. The average monthly household income among birders is about R13 500, and over a fifth of birders have a household income exceeding R20 000 per month.

WHAT GETS US BIRDING?

A large proportion of survey respondents started birding as a consequence of their outdoor pursuits and their general interest in nature and conservation. Many people started birding after visiting a national park or game reserve. Others were introduced to the hobby by converted friends, family and, encouragingly, even school teachers. Many respondents' interest was stimulated by sightings of particular birds or by their garden birds, and some started out keeping cage birds or collecting eggs. Others were simply looking for a new hobby.

ADMIT IT, YOU'RE A TWITCHER...

Nearly 90% of fanatical birders keep lists, and this proportion does not drop off very much for



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the rest of us: 81% of enthusiastic and 64% of casual birders admit to keeping lists. Just about every respondent could tell us roughly how many birds they had seen in southern Africa. Predictably, the more fanatical birders tend to have seen the most birds, and are prepared to go to greater lengths to track down rare birds and vagrants.

BIRDING EFFORT: HOW MUCH AND WHERE

Respondents claimed to spend about 30 days a year birding, two-thirds of which are on overnight trips. Not surprisingly, though, fanatical birders manage to devote twice as much time as this to their hobby. Most birding takes place within 200 kilometres of home. Casual birders tend to stay within South Africa, whereas fanatical birders devote more time to travelling further afield. On average, South Africans spend 83% of their time birding in South Africa, with 6% in Zimbabwe, 5% in Namibia and 4% in Botswana.

The savanna biome or 'bushveld' is a favourite destination, soaking up a third of all birding time. This can be attributed to its high diversity of birds and large number of protected areas, such as the Kruger National Park. Significant effort also is spent birding in grassland, coastal, wetland and forest habitats, with relatively little time spent in the more arid habitats. Protected areas play a major role: most people spend 35–55% of their birding time in

Many people started birding after visiting a national park or game reserve and their hobby grew out of their general interest in nature and conservation.

reserves. Many private nature reserves have already cottoned on to the value of birders and advertise themselves as birding destinations. Conservators need to realize the value of reserves where one can walk around without being threatened by big and hairy mammals!

LET ME SEE YOUR LEICAS...

How does your equipment compare with that of other birders? Respondents reported owning no fewer than 68 brands of binoculars and 16 of telescopes. Price-wise, almost 50% of all binoculars bought fell into the less expensive to middle-price bracket.

Investment in birding equipment increases with birding enthusiasm. Few casual and enthusiastic birders own telescopes or recording equipment, while most fanatical birders do. Putting it all together, the average casual, enthusiastic and fanatical birder owns basic birding equipment (binoculars, 'scopes, tripods and audio equipment) to the resale value of about R2 300, R3 900 and R10 700, respectively. And we won't even mention the investment in bird books...

DOING IT ON THE CHEAP

About half of all birders choose to camp on birding trips, with B&B-type accommodation a close second choice. The more manic the birder, the less is budgeted per night on accommodation and food. Casual birders spend on average R180

per night, enthusiastic birders about R160 and fanatics are prepared to rough it for R130 per night, all in. But fanatics still spend more in the end, because they spend more time in the field.

This somewhat parsimonious tendency is reflected in the independent nature of South African birders. South Africans make little use of bird tours either within their own country or even abroad; perhaps understandably given that we are currency-challenged! About half of all birders prefer to bird independently, citing expense and group sizes being too large as reasons for avoiding organized tours. Another reason for not going on tours was bad timing in relation to school holidays, but very few people thought that there were too few tour opportunities. South Africans were willing to pay only R2 300 for a 10-day South African tour and R4 100 for a similar-length tour elsewhere in Africa, excluding travel to the destination. This is roughly half the real cost of such tours. Offshore 'pelagic' tours feature fairly strongly, though, as there is little opportunity for independence here. Of those who went on the four-day *Symphony* cruise from Durban in 1997, more than two-thirds said they would go again.

FLOCKING TO SOUTH AFRICA

It's not just local birders who contribute to the value of South Africa's birds; visitors from other countries make a significant contribution. We



Left *Investment in birding equipment increases with birding enthusiasm.*

Below *Many birders began birding as a result of a close encounter with a beautiful bird, such as these White-fronted Bee-eaters. Perhaps this is a lesson about the opportunities we should pro-*

The biggest twitch: almost 400 birders paid some R2 000 each to join the Symphony on a dedicated birding trip up the Mozambique Channel in 1997. Bad weather resulted in few birds and many seasick passengers, but most birders said they would do it again!



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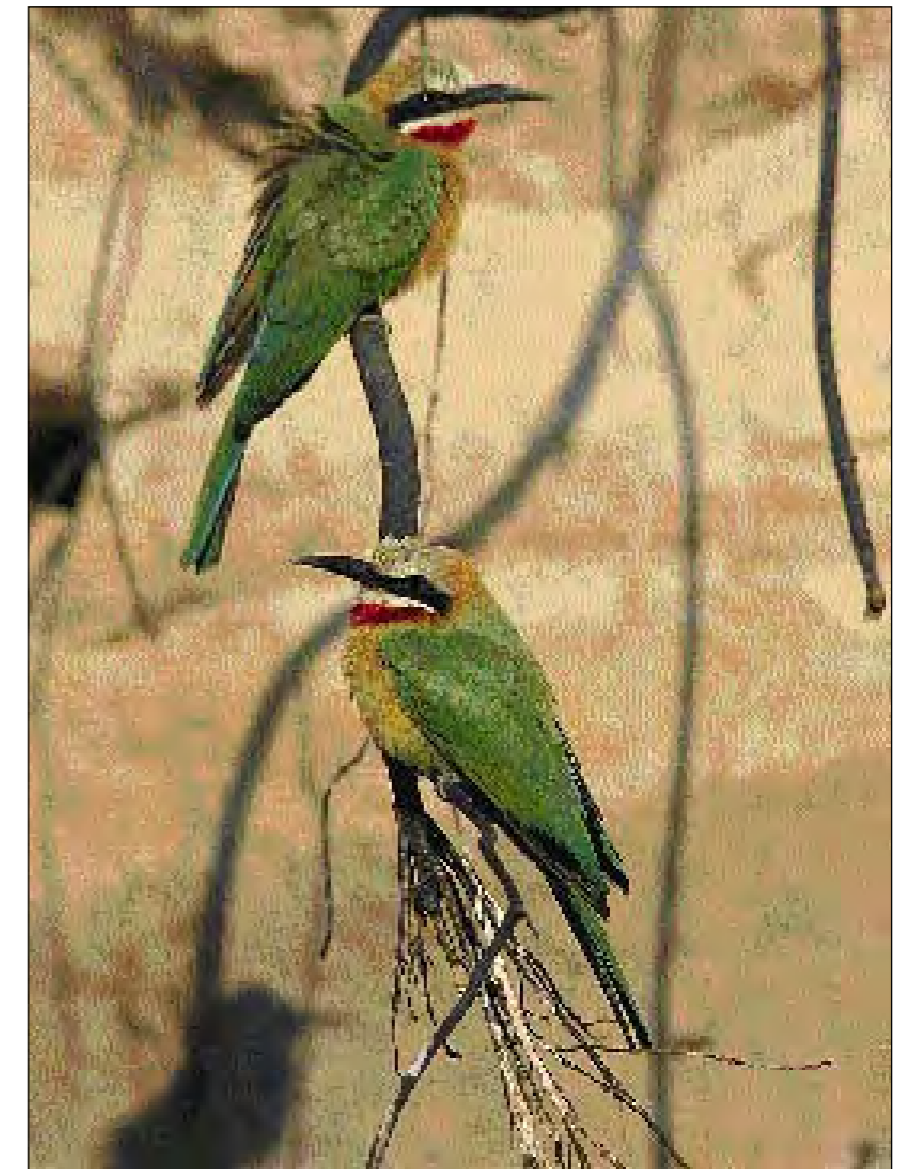
estimated that some 750-1 500 international visitors come to South Africa each year primarily to watch birds. Almost all come from wealthy, developed countries, and spend an average of R12 000 for a three-week trip (excluding airfares to reach South Africa). Roughly equal numbers of visitors come on organized tours as travel independently, with rapid growth in the numbers of independent visitors in recent years. Birders on tours spend more on average (R700 per day) than self-guided visitors (R450), but they also see more bird species.

Internationally, South Africa is seen as an attractive birding destination because of the large number of endemic species, the large (but manageable) total diversity, and the excellent field guides and birding information. Other positive factors include the many other natural and scenic attractions and the excellent infrastructure and improved health conditions relative to the rest of Africa.

BILLION-DOLLAR BIRDS

Although many birders do it on the cheap, together they spend a significant amount of money in the country. In South Africa alone, active local birders are conservatively estimated to spend R70-130 million each year (a more liberal estimate of the birding population would bring domestic expenditure to a whopping R300 million).

Visiting birders spend an additional R10-25 million. To this amount can be added the money spent by non-birding tourists at bird-related attractions such as the penguin colony at Boulders Coastal Park in Simon's Town. All in all, the R100-220 million, at least, that birding contributes to the economy is about 0.03% of



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A BIRDER'S BUDGET REVEALED

Average amounts, in rands, spent in 1997 by different types of South African birders on their hobby

	Casual birders	Enthusiastic birders	Fanatical birders
Birding equipment and paraphernalia			
Binoculars	130	486	840
Telescopes	8	125	493
Tripods	5	22	44
Audio	1	29	65
Photographic (<i>part for birding</i>)	214	257	369
4WD vehicle payments (<i>part for birding</i>)	508	2363	4269
Computer software	98	151	165
Bird feeders & feed	93	118	179
Books & magazines	169	317	826
Other paraphernalia (<i>e.g. clothes</i>)	53	142	499
SUBTOTAL	1279	4010	7749
Clubs and courses			
Club subscriptions	71	176	261
Courses	21	144	103
SUBTOTAL	92	320	364
Self-guided birding trips			
Accommodation	1905	2668	3756
Mileage costs	351	803	1885
Public transport and car rental	554	586	2412
Park entry and guiding fees	477	485	533
SUBTOTAL	3287	4542	8586
Organized bird tours			
Pelagic trips (<i>excluding Symphony tour 1997</i>)	0	80	108
South African tours	11	214	157
SA-based tours elsewhere	0	300	640
SUBTOTAL	11	594	905
TOTAL ANNUAL EXPENDITURE (R)	4 669	9 466	17 604

the country's Gross Domestic Product: a small, but not insignificant, sum in the same ballpark as the total income generated by South African National Parks. This does not even take into account the partial role that birds play in attracting generalist visitors to national parks. Consider, too, that much of this expenditure takes place in depressed rural areas.

Under the unlikely assumption that interest in birding does not increase in future, the present value of birding in South Africa over the next couple of decades is at least R1.6–3.5 billion. In terms of birding, this implies that each species could be worth R2–5 million, if all species were equal. Of course, rare species and endemics are probably worth much more, hence greatly justifying the investment in their conservation to even the most cold-blooded economists.

The above values do not include the amount that birders would be willing to spend over and above what they have to at present to watch birds. Nor do they incorporate the potentially huge amount that people would be willing to pay just to be satisfied that our birds are adequately protected. They also do not take into consideration the benefits of birds aside from recreational and aesthetic appreciation. Birds provide many essential and valuable functions in our ecosystems, such as pollination and seed dispersal, as well as other more direct uses for food and in traditional medicines. The value of birding is just a fraction of the value of South Africa's birds!

Nevertheless, our study has shown that birders and birding are important economic forces in South Africa. The findings are already being used to lobby effectively for the conservation of important bird areas. □

Pelagic cruises are costly but facilitate access to one of the richest seabird faunas of any country. They are increasingly in demand by local and foreign birders.



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