



HOME-GROUND ADVANTAGE

Cape Sugarbird

PETER RYAN (3)

working your patch

Spiralling fuel costs and the economic downturn are forcing many birders to reconsider how they enjoy their hobby. And it's not just the direct costs of birding that should be considered. Driving and flying are major contributors to carbon emissions, and you might be surprised to discover how much birding adds to your carbon footprint (see box on page 18). One solution is to develop a local patch close to home and track how its avifauna changes with time. In addition to the rewards you will reap, you can also gather valuable data for assessing how global change is affecting bird populations. Over the next year, *Africa – Birds & Birding* will feature various birders and their patches to highlight the joys of local birding. In the first article, Peter Ryan reports on his experiences and sightings in the Cape Peninsula.

For most birders, nothing quite matches the rush of birding in a wholly new environment. But there is a gentler pleasure in working your local patch, where every sound is familiar, and you have the chance to get to know the birds intimately.

I first encountered serious 'patchers' in Zimbabwe, shortly after independence. During the bush war, travel was severely constrained, keeping birders close to home. As a result, they knew their own areas backwards, which was a boon to visiting birders. Want to see

a Spotted Creeper? There's a pair over here. Violet-backed Sunbird? Try that patch of miombo over there.

Growing up in the southern Cape Peninsula in the 1970s, I was offered a wide range of birding options. The closest I came to a local patch was

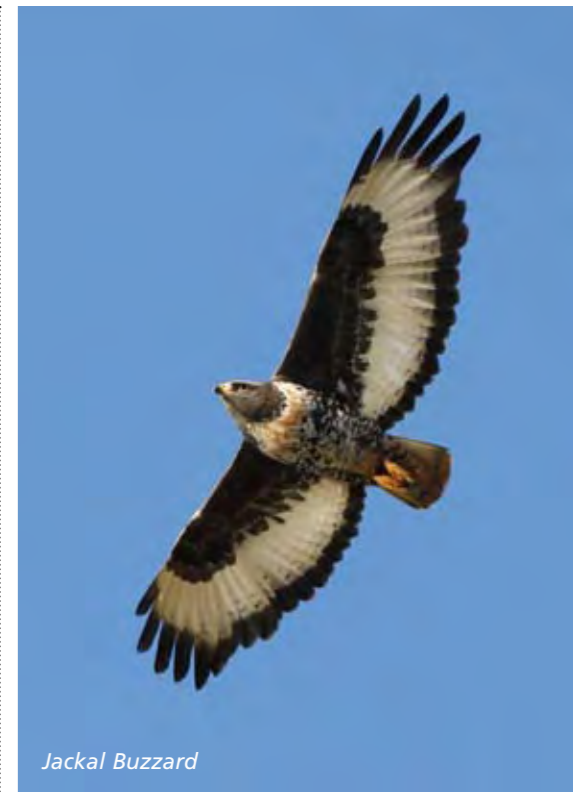


Muizenberg fynbos

Strandfontein Sewage Works, which rewarded my efforts with a few good rarities over the years. I still visit the works regularly, but the development of a new treatment plant has rendered the pans a shadow of their former selves. In recent years, I have spent more time on the mountains between Muizenberg and Kalk Bay – partly to escape the bustle of city life and partly because I can walk onto the mountain from my house.

At face value, mountain fynbos is one of the least exciting habitats for birds. A typical outing might yield only 20 species, but there are enough quality birds to make it rewarding. All three of the fynbos endemics that occur on the Peninsula (Cape Sugarbird, Orange-breasted Sunbird and Cape Siskin) are common in the area, as are other southern African endemics like Cape Grassbird and Ground Woodpecker. Probably the most exciting and frustrating species is Striped Flufftail, which is remarkably hard to actually see, despite being resident in the area. This makes it all the more rewarding when, after a patient wait, one finally does appear, creeping through the undergrowth at your feet.

Rarities are in short supply, but oddities do appear from time to time. Scarce migrants include Eurasian Hobby and Spotted Flycatcher, whereas an African Snipe in a marshy area near Steenberg Peak was testament to the vagility of wetland species. Resident raptors include Peregrine, Jackal Buzzard and



Jackal Buzzard

Rock Kestrel, but Verreaux's Eagles sadly no longer breed, and are now rare visitors from adjacent areas of the Peninsula mountain chain. White-necked Ravens also appear to be dwindling, possibly as a result of the invasion by Pied Crows over the past two decades. Species that have disappeared in recent years despite no obvious changes to their habitat include African Stonechat and Yellow Bishop.

Other species persist, despite reductions in their populations on the Cape Peninsula. These include Grey-winged Francolin, Cape Turtle-Dove and the two rock-thrushes. Cape Rock-Thrush numbers fell during the 1990s, but appear to be recovering to some extent, whereas

tips for environmentally responsible birding

- Bird close to home
- Car pool when birding in groups
- Bird on foot or from a bike
- Plan fewer, longer birding trips to cut total distance
- Offset your carbon emissions
- Maximise the value of your birding by contributing data to atlases and other programmes designed to monitor birds and their habitats



TIM JACKSON

The House Sparrow is being adversely affected by urban habitat changes.

sparrows face HOUSING CRISIS

Once ubiquitous in both urban and rural areas, the House Sparrow is suffering a major decline in European cities. Greater human population densities and changes in socio-economic factors in urban areas are impacting on its habitat and foraging and nesting opportunities.

For many bird species, the urbanisation of natural landscapes is bad news. Not so the House Sparrow *Passer domesticus*, which thrives in both urban and rural areas and is generally more abundant in anthropogenic habitats than in natural ones. This distinctive little passerine is native to Eurasia and North Africa, but now occurs virtually worldwide as a result of introductions by humans. In southern Africa, House Sparrows were brought to several coastal cities during the 19th century, and from there they spread throughout the region.

It may, therefore, come as a surprise to learn that, over much of its original European range, the House Sparrow is in trouble. The UK population has plunged by more than half, from an estimated 13 million pairs in the early 1970s to six million pairs in the late 1990s. There is less information on sparrow numbers in continental Europe, but recent declines have been documented in several major cities, including Hamburg, Prague and Moscow. The negative trends in House Sparrow numbers have led to it being listed as a species of special conservation concern in the UK, and in 2006 BirdLife International designated it a species of European conservation concern.

A study recently published in the *Journal of Ornithology* argues that the current declines in House Sparrow populations, particularly in the UK, are being driven by urban trends that result in changes in habitat structure, foraging opportunities and the availability of nest sites. An important observation is that

the sparrows seem to be disappearing from more affluent areas, although they are still abundant in areas of lower socio-economic status. One direct link between socio-economic factors and sparrow populations appears to arise from the way in which private gardens are managed. In more affluent areas of London, for example, increased demand for off-street parking has led to an estimated two-thirds of front gardens being at least partially paved. The paving of gardens, combined with the planting of ornamental shrubs, is thought to have decreased the availability of insects, an important food source for the sparrows when they are raising chicks.

Besides leading to decreases in insect abundance in more affluent areas, differences in garden management practices between areas of higher and lower socio-economic status also affect the sparrows. The birds may face a higher predation risk when foraging in neatly trimmed, more homogenous gardens in upmarket suburbs than they do in less well-maintained gardens with mosaics of shorter and longer grass and/or weedy patches. Although Eurasian Sparrowhawks regularly prey on House Sparrows in gardens, the most convincing evidence for a link between predation and declines in sparrow populations involves domestic cats. One recent study, which examined the impact of domestic cats on prey species in the city of Bristol, concluded that the House Sparrow is one of three bird species for which cat-predation rates are high enough to cause significant population declines. Another

study, based on a five-month questionnaire survey, estimated that the UK cat population killed a staggering 27 million birds during this period.

One of the reasons that House Sparrows do so well in urban areas is their propensity for nesting in cavities in buildings. Another factor that appears to be contributing to the species' disappearance from more affluent areas is the fact that there tend to be more potential nest sites in buildings that are older and/or in worse states of repair. The increasing use of flatter roof tiles and plastic (rather than wooden) fascia boards are among the factors thought to be reducing the number of potential nest sites on more modern buildings. And, as dilapidated buildings generally provide more nesting opportunities, urban-regeneration projects that improve human socio-economic conditions can be expected to cause losses of sparrow breeding colonies, a phenomenon that has been confirmed in Berlin.

ANDREW McKECHNIE

REFERENCE
Shaw, L.M., Chamberlain, D. and Evans, M. 2008. 'The House Sparrow *Passer domesticus* in urban areas: reviewing a possible link between post-decline distribution and human socio-economic status.' *Journal of Ornithology* 149: 293-299.



Juvenile Sentinel Rock-Thrush

PETER RYAN

only one pair of Sentinel Rock-Thrushes endures. The female of this pair is an unusually male-like bird, suggesting she may be very old. She is also quite tolerant of people, and it is very rewarding to spend an hour or so watching her forage for herself and her chicks. Although she seems to have little difficulty securing a wide range of large insect prey, I have twice seen her steal beetles from Cape girdled lizards.

You may think it's boring to repeatedly visit the same area, but each visit brings something new. There are seasonal differences and, at a longer time-scale, fynbos has evolved to withstand and even promote regular burning. Fires add a dynamic element to the area's vegetation, with many birds moving out after fires and others replacing them. But the birds seen also change on a daily basis, especially highly mobile species like swifts and swallows. And there's always the chance of something unexpected turning up. Top of my want-list for Muizenberg is a Hottentot Buttonquail...

The intimate knowledge of the local distributions and abundance of birds obtained by regularly visiting the same patch is invaluable. Some species are surprisingly localised, such as Cape Bunting – another species that appears to be less common than it once was – and Grey-backed Cisticola. The latter is much less abundant than Neddicky, appearing to favour flatter areas without rocky outcrops. Such knowledge makes for efficient, accurate assessments of local bird populations and allows changes in their status to be detected with confidence. So, identify an area close to home and start your own local patch. Keep records of each visit and the approximate numbers of birds you see. Over time, this will become an increasingly valuable log of local environmental health. And if you live in South Africa, Swaziland or Lesotho, register for the South African Bird Atlas Project (<http://sabap2.adu.org.za>) and submit your records! □

green birding CALCULATE YOUR CARBON FOOTPRINT

We all need to understand the environmental consequences of our lifestyle choices. I was recently shamed into calculating my carbon footprint by a colleague, and the results were startling. I consider myself a reasonably green consumer – I commute by train, avoid flying to meetings as much as possible, and have an energy- and water-efficient house. Yet my footprint for the past year was roughly nine tonnes of carbon, close to the South African national average. Even more sobering is the fact that birding comprised almost half of this load. Flights to Iceland and Zambia contributed about a quarter of my annual footprint, with car-based birding making up the balance. And this was a year when I didn't do much birding! Imagine the impact of people who chase big year lists... Visit www.carbonfootprint.com or www.cap.org.za/calculator to work out your footprint.

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