



FOCUS ON THE

AVIAN DEMOGRAPHY UNIT

The Avian Demography Unit undertakes bird research in partnership with BirdLife South Africa

ON THE TRACK OF THE WHITE STORK IN AFRICA

It is well known that the White Storks *Ciconia ciconia* which breed in Europe migrate to Africa for the northern winter. Most take advantage of the narrowest sea crossings, and they are funnelled into Africa at either end of the Mediterranean Sea during August and September, with young birds travelling a few weeks before the adults. *The Atlas of Southern African Birds* shows that the storks begin to arrive in Zimbabwe from about October. They then slowly move southwards, reaching the Western Cape in November and December. These European birds do not breed in southern Africa. But some storks do it differently.

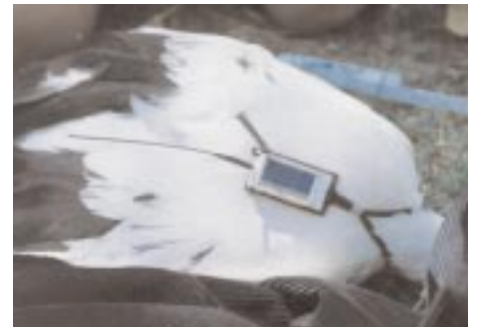
Small numbers of White Storks are known to have bred in South Africa, in four different localities, at various times over the past 70 years. One pair nested near Oudtshoorn, 400 kilometres east of Cape Town, from about 1933 to 1940. Since the late 1950s, up to four pairs have bred in the Bredasdorp region, 200 kilometres east of Cape Town; in 2000 there was a single nest. One pair bred near Mossel Bay, 350 kilometres east of Cape Town, from about 1960 to 1976. Since the mid-1970s, pairs of genuinely wild White Storks have taken to breeding on top of

the cages at the Tygerberg Zoo near Cape Town. In 1975, the nest was above the lion. There is no precise record of developments here; numbers waxed and waned. In recent years, the number of breeding pairs has steadily increased; in 2000, there were five nests, including one above the panther.

Unlike the storks that breed in Europe, the South African breeders seem to remain in the vicinity of the nest site all year round. However, their offspring do not. The big question is: 'Where do these young storks go?' There are tantalising clues derived from ringed chicks at the Bredasdorp nests. One stork was found four months after ringing near the border between Zambia and Tanzania; the bird died in March, so it would have been migrating northwards with birds returning to Europe. Another recovery was made in the Free State, exactly four years after ringing. Had it been to Europe? There is just enough information to suggest that we are on to an interesting story.

With this in mind, the Vogelwarte Radolfzell of the Max Planck Institute in Germany collaborated with the Avian Demography Unit (ADU) in arranging a satellite telemetry project starting in

December 2000. We hope to unravel the mystery of what happens to these birds after they leave the nest. The solar-powered satellite transmitter is state-of-the-art equipment and ought to be able to transmit signals for years. About 10 position fixes are obtained every day. The tags weigh 35 grams, about one per cent of the weight of a stork, and less than the relative weight of a pair of shoes on a person. It is known from earlier studies that they do not influence behaviour. We fitted transmitters on to five large nestlings: four at Tygerberg Zoo and one at Bredasdorp. The birds fledged during December. □



The solar-powered satellite tag is attached to the bird using a harness that has proved remarkably successful over the years.

Willem van den Bossche, International Co-ordinator for Belgische Natuur- & Vogelreservatie, the BirdLife Partner in Belgium, replaces a large White Stork nestling in the nest above the panther at Tygerberg Zoo.



LES UNDERHILL (2)

As part of our contribution towards raising awareness of bird migration, the ADU and the Vogelwarte Radolfzell are undertaking this project in such a way that all can participate. Provided that the fledglings survive the hazardous first weeks of life out of the nest, their progress will be shown on the ADU website at www.uct.ac.za/depts/stats/adu/

Bookmark the site and return to it for regular updates, possibly for as long as the next few years. Watch this mystery unravel. The ADU website also provides much additional background information on this project.

If you know of any other breeding pairs of White Storks elsewhere in southern Africa, please inform Professor Les Underhill at the ADU.

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