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## Editorial

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As usual, it has been a stimulating and exciting excursion to edit this issue of BN. You will notice some familiar names among the authors and I thank them for continuing to support BN with interesting and original material. You will also notice some entirely new names, and that makes me happy because I would like very much for a wide range of amateur and professional ornithologists to use BN as an outlet for their short-note material. I would especially like to see more amateurs – ordinary birders – submitting their valuable observations in the form of short articles.

Almost daily I see postings to SABirdnet that have potential to be worked into articles for BN. Sometimes I contact the relevant birders and suggest to them that they submit an article. Frequently they respond positively, sometimes they don't. I feel sure that the great majority of birders would like to see their observations in print, and would like to know that those observations are thus available to ornithologists around the world, over the long term, and can be used to update new editions of volumes like *Roberts'*, *Birds of Africa*, and *Birds of the World*. So, why don't they submit articles in the first place? is the question I ask myself.

The answer probably lies in a lack of confidence that (a) their information will be considered publishable, and that (b) they are able to write up their observations in an acceptable manner. There are simple solutions to both of these uncertainties. Firstly, if you are not sure whether your observation is worthy of publication, simply e-mail the editor of BN – that's me – and ask me what I think. I will give you an honest answer and I promise not to be rude! My experience is that most unusual observations are worth publishing, and it doesn't necessarily have to be something earth-shattering. Even observations of quite ordinary birds and ordinary behaviours

can be valuable if they are conducted and reported in a systematic manner.

Secondly, on the issue of how to write an acceptable article for publication: it's not as hard as you think. BN is a relatively casual journal, so you can write in a relatively casual style. For an excellent example in this issue, see Phil Whittington's article on cooperative predation in Kelp Gulls. This is a report of unquestionable scientific value, but it is written in a light and amusing style without compromising the accuracy and clarity of the account. You don't have to be amusing, of course. The article by Peter Steyn, for example, is no less scientifically interesting for being short and directly to the point. And, of course, it is my job as editor to assist you in making your article as accurate and as readable as possible, and I will do my best.

You may fret over a lack of relevant scientific literature to cite and refer to. This is not necessarily a problem. The most I expect an amateur ornithologist to do is consult the books that birders normally use, like *Roberts'*, the bird atlas and the field guides, and to refer to these in interpreting observations.

Please don't think that I am against the use of the internet for posting observations – in many cases it is the most appropriate medium. Rare-bird sightings and trip reports, for example, are appropriately reported on the internet. But when a number of unusual sightings are collated into an organized report, such as in Etienne Marais's article on Corn Crake sightings, the information needs to find its way into print so that it can be referred to and cited in years to come.

I want to highlight the contributions by Jan Hofmeyer, Etienne Marais, Faansie Peacock, Chris Roche, Neil Smith, Wessel Swanepoel, Stephanie Tyler and Graham Winch. These are all excellent examples of birders – amateurs – picking up on something interesting in the field, and then following up. Note

that what they did was still just birding – no special techniques or equipment were used – but it was birding with a purpose, and observations were made in a systematic manner and carefully recorded. What they also did was take some trouble to identify relevant plant and animal species. This is extremely valuable because it helps define the habitat requirements and feeding habits of birds in an objective and verifiable way. These arti-

cles are outstanding examples of what ordinary birders can achieve by relatively simple means. I guarantee they will be read with interest by professional ornithologists, and will be used and cited in future literature.

All you avid birders out there, I look forward to a flood of submissions!

*James Harrison*

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### Donors

Generous donations were received from the following organizations and individuals:

E Barnes, Border BirdLife, Cape Bird Club, CHC Urethane products (Pty) Ltd., Dullstroom Flyfishers, S Geysler, L Haines, D Hall, RS Liddle, WQ Nicol, Radiant Lighting, JA Spearpoint, St Francis Bay Bird Club, S van Blerk, CD van Driel and the Wits Bird Club.

We appreciate your support for the work of the Avian Demography Unit.

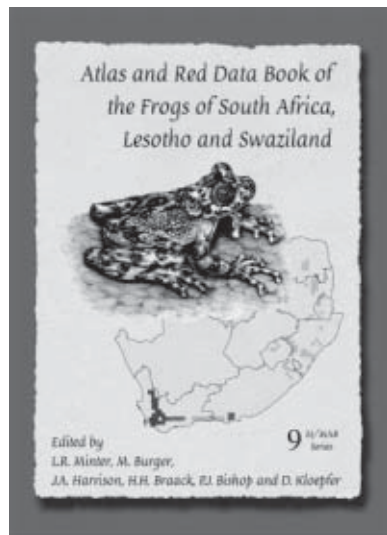
### Getting involved

If you would like to get involved in any of the ADU's projects, either write to **Projects, Avian Demography Unit, University of Cape Town, Rondebosch 7701**, or send an e-mail to [adu@adu.uct.ac.za](mailto:adu@adu.uct.ac.za). Tell us which of the projects interests you, and we will get back to you with the relevant information. The ADU projects are: Birds in Reserves (BIRP); Coordinated Waterbird Counts (CWAC); Coordinated Avifaunal Roadcounts (CAR); the Nest Record Card Scheme (NERCS) and bird ringing (SAFRING).

Please visit [www.aviandemographyunit.org](http://www.aviandemographyunit.org) for an overview of the projects and other ADU activities.

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The price per book is R320. Postage and packaging (within South Africa) is an additional R30.

You may obtain copies by coming in to the ADU and collecting them personally; please arrange this by phoning Sue Kuyper (021 6502423), or James Harrison (021 6502564).

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We look forward to receiving your orders. Please encourage other people to buy the book. The funds raised will assist the Avian Demography Unit to do further conservation-related research.



## Albatross research and conservation at South Africa's subantarctic Prince Edward islands

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### A royal occasion

Albatrosses are charismatic animals. Photographs of them can keep an audience enthralled. I had this confirmed recently when I presented the closing plenary address on the subject of migration patterns and conservation of Southern Ocean albatrosses to nearly 500 delegates and guests at the *Waterbirds around the World* Conference in Edinburgh, Scotland in April of this year (Cooper 2004). A special feature of my presentation was the presence of His Royal Highness, the Prince of Wales in the audience. The Prince spoke immediately after me, expressing his own deep concern for these magnificent birds, which are increasingly threatened by human activity, especially fishing.

This concern is being translated into action on a number of fronts, national and international, and by inter-governmental,

governmental and non-governmental (NGO) bodies. In this article I briefly describe the history of albatross research by South Africa at its subantarctic islands and outline how the country is contributing to efforts to improve their parlous conservation state.

### Albatross research at Marion Island

The subantarctic islands of Marion and Prince Edward in the southern Indian Ocean (known as the Prince Edward Islands) are South Africa's only overseas possessions. Many South Africans will know that there is a weather station on the larger Marion Island, but perhaps fewer will know that the island has been the site of much scientific research for over half a century. Research on albatrosses on Marion commenced in 1952, only five years after South Africa annexed the two islands, when the meteorologist J.J. la Grange banded Wandering Albatrosses *Dio-*



John Cooper is introduced to HRH Prince Charles after the closing plenary session of the *Waterbirds around the World* Conference, April 2004. (Photo by Dougie Barnett.)

*medea exulans* near the weather station and followed their breeding activities over two seasons (La Grange 1962). He found that if birds bred successfully, they could not return in time to breed the next year, thus breeding only every two years, because their whole breeding cycle from nest building and courtship to fledging of the chick exceeds a 12-month period. He also found that birds showed strong fidelity to their mates and to their breeding sites over the seasons, thus showing that the species is an excellent one for a long-term population study that would follow individually marked birds throughout their lives.

*Counts have shown alarming decreases in numbers of several species, including the Wandering Albatross*

Since this pioneering effort, a large number of biologists and field assistants have studied the islands' albatrosses and other seabirds, leading to the awarding of a number of higher degrees (Cooper 2003; Cooper & Brown 1990). Research conducted has been varied, but has concentrated on breeding biology, foraging ecology, diet, physiology and population dynamics. Following on from La Grange's study, we have found out what the albatrosses of the Prince Edward Islands eat (a mixture of squid, fish and small crustaceans), where they forage (up to thousands of kilometres away when not breeding, but less when breeding) and when and how they forage (mainly during the day but also at night, by surface seizing and shallow dives on both dead and live prey (Cooper & Brown 1990; Cooper et al. 1993; Nel et al. 2000, 2001)).

The most significant recent research on albatrosses at Marion Island was carried out by Deon Nel, now the Marine Programme Coordinator of WWF-South Africa, who was awarded his Ph.D. for his studies by the University of Cape Town in 2002. Counts of birds at Marion Island over the last three decades have shown alarming decreases in numbers of several species, including the Wandering Albatross (Nel et al. 2002c). Decreases have been thought to be primarily due to mortality caused by the tuna and

toothfish longline fisheries of the Southern Ocean (Nel et al. 2002a,b,c; 2003). The birds attempt to snatch baited hooks as they are deployed, and are then dragged beneath the surface and drowned. Simple, effective by-catch mitigation measures exist, such as bird-scaring streamers and line setting at night, but now need to be more widely adopted.

### South Africa's conservation activities

Decreases in albatross and petrel populations have also taken place at other nations' sub-antarctic islands, leading to international concern. One outcome of this concern has been the

development of the Agreement on the Conservation of Albatrosses and Petrels (ACAP) at the primary instigation of Australia (Cooper & Ryan 2001). On 6 November 2003, South Africa deposited its Instrument of Ratification with the ACAP Interim Secretariat in Canberra, Australia. By this action, South Africa became the fifth country to join the Agreement, following Australia, Ecuador, New Zealand and Spain. ACAP came into force on 1 February 2004, three months after the required five signatories. At the Edinburgh conference, the United Kingdom announced it had ratified the Agreement, bringing the membership to six.

It is expected that ACAP's First Meeting of Parties will be held in November 2004 in Australia, which currently hosts the Interim Secretariat. South Africa plans to attend this meeting so that it can commence contributing to ACAP from its inception.

South Africa followed a parliamentary process prior to adhering to the Agreement, with presentations made to the Portfolio Committee on Environmental Affairs and Tourism by Marine and Coastal Management officials, university researchers on seabirds and a representative of the international NGO, BirdLife International, during the course of 2002. It is fitting that South Africa has joined ACAP because it hosted the second and final negotiation meeting in Cape

Town in January 2001, at which the final text of the Agreement was adopted. The then Minister of Environmental Affairs and Tourism, Mohammed Valli Moosa, opened the meeting and his closing speech was read for him in his absence by Mr Horst Kleinschmidt, Deputy Director-General of DEAT.

ACAP aims to reduce the threat of extinction to the 28 species of albatrosses and larger petrels covered by the Agreement. It includes an Action Plan which describes a number of conservation measures to be implemented by signatory states to improve the conservation status of the increasingly threatened albatrosses and larger petrels. Apart from reducing seabird by-catch from longline fishing, these include research and monitoring, eradication of introduced species such as rodents and feral cats at breeding sites, reduction of disturbance and habitat loss, and reduction of marine pollution.

South Africa is particularly important for the conservation of albatrosses and petrels. It is a range state to 15 of the 28 species covered under ACAP. The Prince Edward Islands are an important breeding site for nine of these species, most of which have a formal threatened conservation status with declining populations (Crawford et al. 2003; Crawford & Cooper 2003; Nel et al. 2002c). The Prince Edward Islands are particularly important to the Wandering Albatross, hosting more than 40% of the world's population of this charismatic species (Crawford & Cooper 2003). Findings such as these convinced South Africa it needed to become a member of ACAP. It is expected that South Africa's membership of ACAP will further boost conservation-related research on the Prince Edward Islands, allowing for the best management of these important populations of threatened species (Cooper & Ryan 2001).

South Africa's most recent research on ACAP species at the Prince Edward Islands has included tracking Wandering Albatrosses and Grey-headed Albatrosses *Thalas-*

*sarche chrysostoma* at sea with geo-location loggers in the 'sabbatical' year that these biennially-breeding species are away from the islands, work carried out by the Percy FitzPatrick Institute of African Ornithology at the University of Cape Town (UCT) under the leadership of Peter Ryan. To date, 34 of 40 loggers recovered from birds returning to breed have contained useful data, which is currently being extracted and analysed. Exactly where these birds have travelled to and spent their time at sea will be of great importance as international discussions continue among ornithologists and conservationists on where best to propose Marine Protected Areas in the Southern Ocean.

A new research programme, led by Marianne de Villiers of the ADU, commenced on Marion Island in April 2004 to study the effects of human disturbance on a number of species. Preliminary findings suggest that the minimum approach distance by humans to breeding Wandering Albatrosses should be set at 15 m to avoid causing undue stress to the birds (De Villiers et al. submitted ms). Such information is valuable when designing management plans for tourism on islands where albatrosses breed. South Africa's involvement with ACAP has indirectly led to these new projects being supported by the South African National Antarctic Programme of the DEAT, which has managed activities at the Prince Edward Islands for many years.

As part of efforts to conserve seabirds threatened by longline fishing, a draft South African National Plan of Action (NPOA) for Reducing the Incidental Catch of Seabirds in Longline Fisheries has been written under contract to the ADU by John Cooper and Peter Ryan, following guidelines produced by the Committee on Fisheries of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) in 1999. Following a well-attended stakeholders' workshop held in January 2003 in Cape Town, the NPOA-Seabirds has now been redrafted for further

*ACAP aims to reduce the threat of extinction to the 28 species of albatrosses and larger petrels*

consideration by the authorities before being adopted and put into action. Once formally adopted, the NPOA-Seabirds will also apply to the waters surrounding the Prince Edward Islands, thus supporting the aims of the Agreement.

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“Let’s up that thermostat a notch or two, buddy boy.  
Remember, Polly is a tropical bird.”



## Cholera catastrophes: are Kelp Gulls culprits?

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The three recent outbreaks of Pasteurellosis have killed some 20 000 seabirds in the Western Cape province. This makes cholera the third most serious cause of death in regional seabirds during the last ten years. Only oiling, which without SANCCOB intervention would have killed 30 000 birds, and seal predation, estimated to have killed 60 000 birds, have been more serious (Ward & Williams 2004). Here we give reasons why we suspect that Kelp Gulls (or should we say Khoisan Gulls? (Williams 2004)) *Larus vetula* may be the culprits which bring cholera to the seabird islands.

### The disease and its name

The cause of the disease is the bacterium *Pasteurella multocida*. Infections by this bacterium are common among domestic animals, including poultry. The disease has several vernacular names which are applied to particular groups of infected animals. Among domestic cattle, sheep and goats it is called Pasteurellosis. This recognizes the work of Pasteur who developed the first vaccine for this disease. Among domestic chickens and ducks, the disease is called Fowl Cholera, but among wild birds it is generally called Avian Cholera. In none of the three disease is there any association with the cholera which infects humans. The bird forms were termed cholera because the symptoms – diarrhoea and rapid death – were similar to those of the unrelated human cholera. Having three commonly used names for the same disease leads to confusion. We recommend that, at least regionally, we henceforth call the disease Pasteurellosis in all forms of outbreak. This has two advantages. Most importantly, it keeps those concerned with outbreaks of the disease on the same wavelength irrespective of whether mammals or domes-

tic or wild birds are concerned. Secondly, the dropping of the name ‘cholera’ reduces the potential for public alarm.

### A possible disease vector

There have been four definite and two probable outbreaks of Pasteurellosis in wild southern African birds. All six of these outbreaks have been restricted to seabirds at islands in the southwestern Cape. We have tried to understand why the disease occurs only in this area and think we have the answer – Kelp Gulls. This article presents our reasoning for coming to this conclusion.

Southern African seabirds have three sub-regional populations which are related to the limited availability of islands upon which they can breed in relative safety. These sub-regions comprise islands off Namibia and, in South Africa, islands off the southwestern Cape, and islands in Algoa Bay. To date, Pasteurellosis has occurred only in the southwestern Cape sub-region that lies geographically between the Namibian and Algoa Bay sub-regions. If Pasteurellosis infects southern Africa via seabirds along the coast, we would expect outbreaks of the disease to also occur in one of the outlying sub-regions, indicating the direction of infection. That this is not so suggests that Pasteurellosis in the southwestern Cape is derived from mainland sources. There have been no known outbreaks of Pasteurellosis among wild birds elsewhere in southern Africa – and indeed across all sub-Saharan Africa we know of only one outbreak which was among waterfowl in Kenya in the 1940s. However Pasteurellosis is known from domestic stock, including occurrences among sheep and poultry on the southwestern Cape mainland. We therefore believe that the source of Pasteurellosis on southwestern seabird islands may be derived

from a domestic animal source. There are two likely means of transmission of the disease to the seabird islands: via domestic animals, or via birds which breed on the islands but which regularly forage on the mainland. Most of the southwestern seabird islands have been controlled for the past 100 years to protect their seabird populations as a guano resource or, latterly, as nature reserves. With few exceptions, there have been no large, non-marine animals on these islands through the past 50 years. The exceptions are: Dyer Island, where some pigs were apparently kept (illegally) by staff of the former Division of Sea Fisheries; and Robben Island, where several species of antelope were introduced. There is no evidence of Robben Island being a centre of a Pasteurellosis outbreak, nor of any Pasteurellosis outbreak at Dyer Island during the period pigs were kept there (though this island has been a centre for subsequent outbreaks). From time to time, small domestic animals have been kept at some islands, notably chickens at Dassen Island, and some island staff have had dogs or cats, notably at Robben Island. However, we have found no likely linkage between the keeping of these animals and recent Pasteurellosis outbreaks.

We consider it far more likely that the source of Pasteurellosis outbreaks is contact between birds which breed at the islands but which come into regular contact with domestic stock, or stock waste, whilst they forage on the mainland. Our prime suspect, for several compelling reasons, is the Kelp Gull. The literature indicates that gulls have been associated with a high proportion of reported Pasteurellosis outbreaks among wild birds. Gulls of many species are well known scavengers at human refuse tips and at areas where animal waste is dumped. They also occasionally scavenge at carcasses of dead domestic animals left in fields. They thus have potential access to material from domestic animals that have died of Pasteurellosis.

Only three species of gull have breeding

populations in the southwestern Cape: the Greyheaded, Hartlaub's and Kelp gulls. We believe the first two species are unlikely transmitters of Pasteurellosis since both are small-billed and small-sized and so too small to tackle carcasses in the field or to compete with Kelp Gulls at dumps. Kelp Gulls are numerous at the seabird islands, but when not breeding, most forage on the mainland, some of them at field carcasses, but the majority at municipal or farm waste dumps.

There is additional circumstantial evidence supportive of Kelp Gulls as a link with mainland sources of Pasteurellosis. Kelp

*A killer disease that sporadically kills off 20 000 endemic seabirds*

Gulls occur at all southern African seabird islands. However, numbers are small in Algoa

Bay and most birds there can feed coastally and so have little contact with farm offal. In Namibia, the numbers of Kelp Gulls are substantial, supported by the large regional seal populations and by fishery waste, but they have scarcely any contact with any Pasteurellosis source since the Namib Desert separates them from contact with agriculture. Formerly, Kelp Gull numbers were limited at the seabird islands to reduce their predation on guano-producing birds. Numbers have risen through the past 50 years because control at the islands has been relaxed whilst greatly increased amounts of human waste have become available on the mainland for the gulls to feed on.

We hypothesize that some Kelp Gulls feed on infected carcasses but, being scavengers with probable high immunity levels, become infected at sub-lethal levels and so develop immunity to the disease. These birds then 'carry' the disease to the islands where it infects species which, because of low immunity and contagious life-styles (as in the case of Cape Cormorants), die in substantial numbers.

Outbreaks of Pasteurellosis are spasmodic. This raises two issues, how and where does the bacterium 'sit-out' the intervals between outbreaks. The literature indicates three possibilities: encapsulation in

either water or soil, or sub-lethal transmission among immune carrier individuals. Neither encapsulation in water nor soil is supported in the case of outbreaks among southwestern Cape seabirds. Most islands have no permanent water bodies. Nor is there any obvious means whereby bacteria in the limited, heavily guano impregnated, soil would suddenly transform to cause an outbreak. Thus, continued life in carrier individuals seems by far the most likely means of Pasteurellosis survival between outbreaks. This might occur in seabird carriers, including gulls, but if so it is generally difficult to understand why two of the three recent outbreaks have occurred in the early part of the breeding season when birds should be at their fittest.

We consider it more likely that Pasteurellosis 'sits-out' periods between outbreaks in domestic stock, especially chickens. Chickens are often kept under conditions which favour rapid spread of micro-organisms. We suspect that in such conditions new strains of the bacterium develop. Outbreaks with major deaths are likely to be controlled by veterinary authorities and proper disposal of carcasses supervised. However, the occasional death of one or a few birds may not be reported and the carcasses may be disposed of without proper care. Scavenging gulls could then feed on the carcasses and, because of the high immunity characteristic of scavenger species, could survive to become carriers which transfer the new strain to the seabird islands. We suspect that the summer outbreaks of Pasteurellosis

*. . . the carcasses may be disposed of without proper care. Scavenging gulls could then feed on the carcasses . . .*

at Dyer Island may be related to the return of gulls to breed. The early breeding season, with the need to establish territories and find a mate, is a period of considerable stress for gulls. It may be this stress that enables the Pasteurellosis bacteria to break the 'immunity barrier', cause the carrier to become ill, and so trigger a disease outbreak.

A killer disease that sporadically kills off 20 000 endemic seabirds and which, if it spread to the Namibian and Algoa Bay sub-regions, could easily kill a lot more, is a cause of major concern, and cost, to conservation authorities. Currently we are planning to follow-up our hypothesis that Kelp Gulls may be the culprits. Through the next breeding season we intend to undertake a programme of sampling for sub-lethal Pasteurel-

losis among Kelp Gulls at Dyer and Dassen islands and in birds taken to SANCCOB. In addition,

all fresh carcasses of Kelp Gulls will be collected for veterinary analysis. Keep your fingers crossed that this reveals the cause of this disease at our seabird islands. If it does then we shall not commence a holocaust for Kelp Gulls, killing birds to reduce the number of potential carriers. Rather we will focus on closing off the potential sources of disease through correct disposal of infected domestic stock on the mainland.

**Ward V.L. & Williams A.J. 2004.** Coastal killers. Bird Numbers 13(1): 14–17.

**Williams A.J. 2004.** Is that a Kelp, Cape, or Khoisan Gull? Bird Numbers 13(1): 21–23.



## Great White Pelicans *Pelecanus onocrotalus*: waterbirds or farm birds?

Marta de Ponte Machado<sup>1</sup> & Jan Hofmeyr

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The scene is dramatic: 1200 Great White Pelicans, 600 to 1300 White Storks, 500 Kelp Gulls, 500 Sacred Ibises and 500 Cattle Egrets all gathered on a pig farm in the Western Cape to feed on surplus chicken offal fed to pigs. Indeed a bizarre restaurant!

According to the classification of the Ramsar Convention (RAMSAR 1999), 'a waterbody that regularly supports 1% of the individuals in a population of one species should be considered internationally important'. Following this definition closely, the small artificial dam surrounded by agricultural fields on this pig farm could be considered a potential Ramsar site!

The breeding pelican population in the Western Cape is about 600 pairs, or 1200 individuals (Fig. 1). If one assumes that there are another 800 immature pelicans (estimated), then one can sometimes see 60% of the total Western Cape pelican population on the farm at one time.

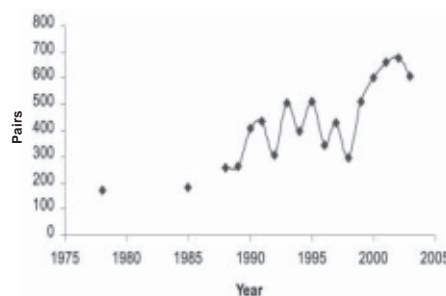
Jan Hofmeyr has monitored the number of pelicans at the farm since the end of 2000. In the first year, the maximum numbers of pelicans counted were generally fewer than 100, with a few counts of 200–300 birds. Numbers then oscillated around this higher level, with occasional counts of up to 400. From April 2003, there was an abrupt change in the pattern and counts of over 600 birds became common. The maximum number of pelicans seen on the pig farm was 1200 birds, recorded in January 2004.

All pelicans in the Western Cape belong to the Dassen Island population. This colony has experienced a marked and steady increase in numbers over the past 2–3 decades. As reviewed in Crawford et al. (1995), Great White Pelicans started breeding on Dassen Island in the 1950s, after a long history of being chased away from other offshore

islands by guano scrapers and seals. In 1955, the total population in the Western Cape was only 20 or 30 pairs. By the mid-1990s, the number of breeding pairs had reached 500, and in 2002 there were 677 pairs.

Pelicans are known to occasionally scavenge on recently dead carcasses, mainly of fish. At least up till the late 1970s, pelicans in the Western Cape relied mainly on natural sources of food (Guillet & Crowe 1981; Guillet & Furness 1985). The situation is very different now: pelican chick regurgitations, analysed by Marine and Coastal Management (MCM) in the period 1990–94, showed that chicken remains accounted for an astonishing 42% by mass of the chicks' diet (Crawford et al. 1995). On the pig farm, pelicans have often been seen swallowing whole dead chickens, when these are available, although the main food is chicken entrails.

It is not known for how long chicken offal has been fed to pigs on local pig farms, but it was certainly happening in 1989, 15 years



**Figure 1.** Breeding pairs of Great White Pelicans on Dassen Island, one of only two breeding sites in South Africa, the other being at Lake St Lucia in KwaZulu-Natal (data collected by Marine and Coastal Management).

ago, on three farms in the area. Pelicans were feeding opportunistically at all three farms then. Presently, chicken offal is known to be used at only one farm in the area.

Concern has been raised about the health status of the pelican population, especially considering that 60% of the total Western Cape population gathers on the pig farm at one time. Accidental poisoning or the spread of diseases are some potential threats.

The ready availability of this new source of food has been postulated as the mechanism behind the recent pelican population expansion in the Western Cape (Crawford et al. 1995). However, a more detailed analysis could reveal the importance of other factors such as reduction of disturbance at the breeding site (thus increasing reproductive success) and immigration from other populations.

In fact, the declaration of Dassen Island as a Provincial Nature Reserve in 1988 (Wolfaardt 2000) could be one of the main factors leading to the expansion of this population (Crawford et al. 1995). The guano scraping activities were discontinued in 1974 (Wolfaardt 2000) and no disturbance is allowed in the proximity of the pelican colony. There are no seals breeding on Dassen Island either, and their settling on the island is discouraged in order to protect the seabirds from predation by seals.

On Dassen Island, pelicans have been observed swallowing live chicks of other colonial breeding birds such as Cape Cormorant *Phalacrocorax capensis*, Kelp Gull *Larus dominicanusi*, Swift Tern *Sterna bergii*, African Penguin *Spheniscus demersus* and Crowned Cormorant *Phalacrocorax coronatus* (Wolfaardt 2000). In 2001, for example, they devoured a whole cohort of Swift Tern chicks, reducing the recruitment on the island to zero (De Villiers et al. 2002). The current pelican population expansion in the Western Cape could intensify the impact of predation on already threatened seabird species.

Pelicans eating live chicks is not a new story in the Cape. In the old days of guano

scraping, pelicans were chased away from the guano islands because they caused disturbance to guano producing species. At the guano platform in Walvis Bay (Namibia), pelicans have been recorded preying on Cape Cormorants (Berry 1976; Crawford et al. 1981). However, this behaviour seems to be unique to these areas, and is very rare in other species of pelicans in the world.

One wonders what would happen if the chicken offal suddenly became unavailable. Would the pelicans go hungry? Would they intensify their predation on other seabirds? Would the population decrease in numbers due to reduced breeding success and then stabilize? What would this optimal population size be?

To answer these and other questions, Marta de Ponte has recently started a project to monitor the pelican population in the Western Cape, as well as to study trends, movements and conservation status in southern Africa. She will continue the ringing effort initiated by MCM in 2000. There are already three cohorts of pelicans born on Dassen Island wearing colour-rings, a total of 358 birds.

Reports of re-sightings anywhere in the country are crucial to understanding pelican movements of dispersal and use of habitat. You can help us immensely by reporting your observations, using the pelican resighting form from the ADU website ([www.aviandemographyunit.org](http://www.aviandemographyunit.org)), e-mailing Marta at [mdeporte@adu.uct.ac.za](mailto:mdeporte@adu.uct.ac.za) or contacting SAFRING at [safring@adu.uct.ac.za](mailto:safring@adu.uct.ac.za).

Some birds will be radio tracked using radio tags and GPS devices to get an idea of their movements. Rob Crawford of MCM recently acquired satellite tracking devices for this purpose and they will be fitted to birds in St Lucia Wetland Park and in the Western Cape. We will report their movements on the ADU website.

Also, individually-marked birds (using new colour-rings and a combination of alpha-numerical characters) will help to confirm basic biological parameters, such as age at first breeding, survival, reproductive suc-

cess and breeding frequency. With this information it will be possible to build a model to predict future trends in the population, including the impact of different management options.

Being large and charismatic birds, pelicans could be considered a flagship-species, attracting more people and effort toward the wetlands where they thrive. Furthermore, they are highly sensitive to disturbances when breeding, and cover large distances for feeding and migration, being good bio-indicators of the health of ecosystems. Conserving pelicans will also conserve their habitat, other waterbirds and all the species that depend on wetlands where they breed, roost and feed.

#### Acknowledgements

Special thanks to Mr and Mrs Fisk for kindly allowing us access to their farm. We would like also to thank Marine and Coastal Management for their data on the number of breeding pairs on Dassen Island, and the ADU staff for their advice and support.

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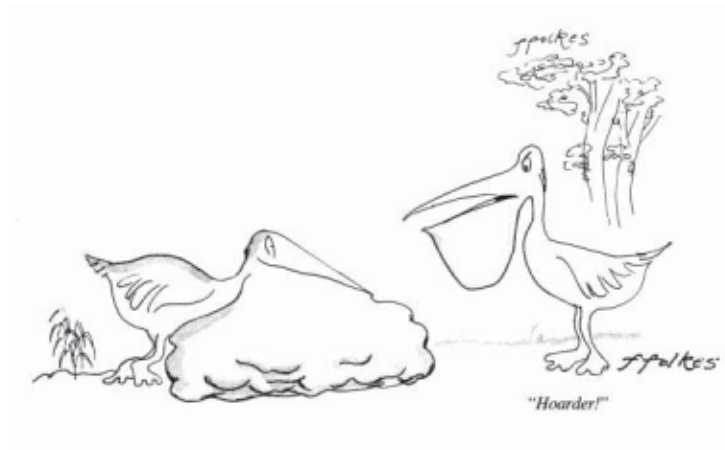
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## Coastal killers: causes of seabird mortality

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Every year millions of birds die, yet few carcasses are found. Most seabirds die at sea, but we can at least monitor causes of death during the time they spend at colonial breeding or roosting localities. In what is globally the most comprehensive such study yet conducted, the probable cause of death was determined for some 10 000 seabirds carcasses at Bird Island, Lambert's Bay, South Africa, between 1997 and 2002 (Table 1). This study's importance lies in accurately detailing what kills seabirds at this breeding colony. For the first time, it provides mortality data which conservation authorities can use to plan management of seabird populations.

Only fully feathered birds (near-fledged to fledged juveniles, immatures, or adults) were considered. Neither egg nor downy-chick mortality was included in this study.

No obvious cause of death could be determined for 649 carcasses, 6% of the total. The two greatest killers were Pasteurellosis (avian cholera; 65.8%), and predatory seals (18.8%, but see below). Red tide poisoning led to the death of 8.3% and hyperthermia (heat stress) killed almost 1%.

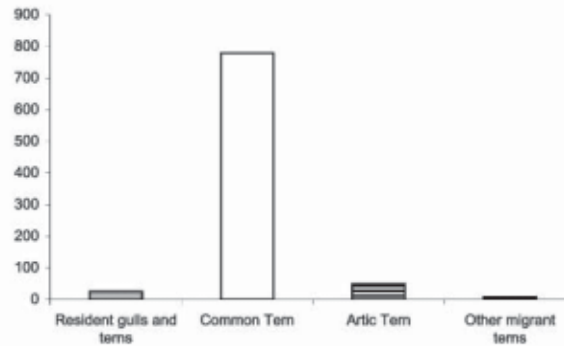
### Human-related deaths

Bird Island is intimately connected with the Lambert's Bay fishing harbour of which it forms the outer protection. Despite this, very few deaths could be directly attributable to human action. In the five years, a total of 75 birds were found oiled at Bird Island. Of these, two were found dead and 73 were caught alive. The latter were sent to SANCCOB (the regional seabird rehabilitation facility) for treatment. None of these

**Table 1.** The cause of death of seabirds whose carcasses were found at Bird Island, Lambert's Bay, during the period September 1997–October 2002.

Species	Seal kills	Pasteurellosis	Red tide	Heat stress	Other (known)	Unknown causes	Total
African Penguin	7	4	0	0	0	8	19
Cape Gannet	1154	394	0	80	7	280	1915
Cape Cormorant	789	6346				184	7319
Crowned Cormorant		3					3
Bank Cormorant	2						2
Great Cormorant		2					2
Kelp Gull	1	19			6	36	62
Hartlaub's Gull		8	10			2	20
Swift Tern		26	17			10	53
Common Tern		26	779			123	928
Arctic Tern			50		1	1	52
Sandwich Tern		2	7			1	10
Whitewinged Tern			1				1
<b>Totals</b>	<b>1953</b>	<b>6830</b>	<b>864</b>	<b>80</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>649</b>	<b>10 390</b>
<b>%</b>	<b>18.8</b>	<b>65.8</b>	<b>8.3</b>	<b>0.8</b>	<b>0.1</b>	<b>6.2</b>	

**Figure 1.**  
Numbers of seabirds killed  
by red tide poisoning  
at Lambert's Bay.



oilings were due to diesel, the fuel used by local vessels. Most were 'spottings' of heavier oil, probably contacted in dispersed form. These oilings were probably the result of small, un-notifiable, spillages of bunker fuel from ocean-going vessels operating in the shipping lanes some 100 km west of Lambert's Bay.

Two Cape Gannets died after colliding with fencing that, until 1999, guided tourists to a tower looking over the colony. This lookout was replaced in 1998 by a new hide whose access path was contained between low stone walls. The older lookout, and the fencing which formerly led to it, were removed. There was no evidence that tourist access to Bird Island led directly to any seabird deaths after the fences to the old tourist tower were removed.

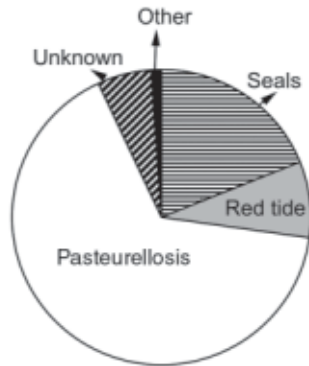
### Episodic killers

Two of the three main killers were episodic 'diseases' whose outbreaks cannot, as yet, be easily predicted and which are difficult for conservation authorities to manage. These were Pasteurellosis (avian cholera) and red tide.

Pasteurellosis was the biggest killer in terms of carcasses found on the island. A total of 6827 seabirds died in a single epidemic during the particularly inclement winter of 2002 (Williams & Ward 2003). This killed primarily Cape Cormorants and Cape Gannets, but also members of an additional seven species.

Extensive red tides – blooms of dinoflagellates, including the neurotoxin-producing *Alexandrium catenella* – occurred off Bird Island through most of the summers of 1997–98 and 1998–99. These blooms cause oxygen depletion in the water. Oxygen depletion forces larger invertebrates and small fish to the surface where oxygen is available. These animals are then within reach of shallow-diving terns and gulls. Some of the prey taken by these birds is already partially impacted by the neurotoxins. The birds seem unable to detect the neurotoxins in their food and continue feeding on this easily obtained prey. By taking numbers of partially affected prey, the amount of neurotoxin in the birds' bodies increases to dangerous levels. The birds evidently feel unwell and return to roosts where some die outright from the poison. Others experience muscle paralysis. This renders them easy prey for predators which, at Bird Island, were Kelp Gulls, Sacred Ibises, or Water Mongoose *Atilax paludinosus*. In all, red tide poisoning directly, or indirectly, caused the death of at least 858 seabirds, most of them migrant Palearctic terns (Fig. 1).

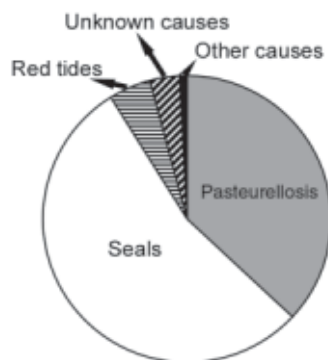
A third 'episodic' killer was heat stroke or hyperthermia. This killed a total of 80 Cape Gannets during four heat waves – two in January and one in October 1998, and one in November 2000. In each heat wave, offshore 'berg' winds caused temperatures in the gannet colony to reach between 25° and 30°C by seven in the morning, rising to peak tempera-



**Figure 2.** Proportion of recovered seabirds killed by Cape Fur Seals compared with other causes.

tures of between 35° and 40°C by midday. Almost all the birds that died of hyperthermia were adults which, refusing to 'leave their post without being relieved', died on their nests.

Episodic events are, under current circumstances, largely unpredictable and management is inevitably reactive. Little, if anything, can be done to minimize mortality due to hyperthermia and red tides. Early removal of Pasteurellosis-killed carcasses can help to reduce spread of this disease. Field managers should, as a matter of urgency, send specimens for veterinary analysis as soon as the



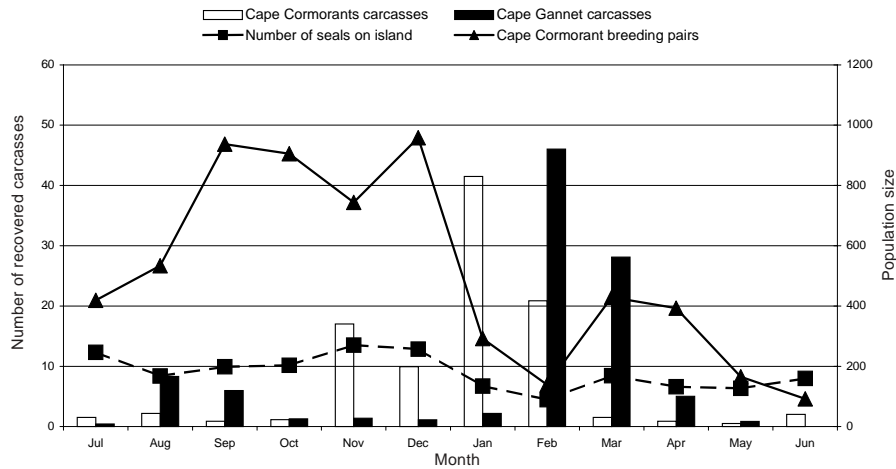
**Figure 3.** Proportion of seabirds killed by Cape Fur Seals after adjustment for under-recovery of carcasses.

numbers of dead or dying birds exceed the local background level. Veterinarians should, from their side, be more forthcoming in their diagnoses. Conservation authorities need to support research that enables better understanding of episodic events which, through wider human actions, seem likely to become more frequent. For instance, there is reason to suspect that Pasteurellosis may be transmitted to seabird colonies via gulls scavenging at inappropriately disposed carcasses of infected domestic poultry (Williams & Parsons 2004). Red tides also seem to have become more common through the past decades, in part as the result of eutrophication of coastal waters, global warming, and the introduction of alien dinoflagellates through jettisoning of ships' ballast water.

### Killer seals

By far the most manageable cause of death of seabirds at Bird Island was predation by Cape Fur Seals *Arctocephalus pusillus*. A total of 1964 carcasses, 19% of all those recovered, were determined to have died as a result of seal attack; Cape Gannets and Cape Cormorants were the most severely impacted species (Table 1, Fig. 2). However, the number of carcasses found on the island seriously under-indicates the scale of seal predation on local seabirds. Most seal attacks were in the sea adjacent to the island and, because of current and wind-drift, carcasses were often carried out to sea or along the coast. Surveys of the regional coastline showed that carcasses of seal-attacked gannets occurred up to 15 km from Bird Island. Systematic observations of predation events close to Bird Island indicated that, on average, only one carcass was recovered for every six seabirds attacked! If a factor of six is applied to the number of carcasses recovered at the island, seal predation becomes, by far, the main cause of mortality (Fig. 3).

Seal predation of seabirds at Bird Island occurred in three phases (Fig. 4). In August and September, adult Cape Gannets start to build their nests of rainfall-moistened guano.



**Figure 4.** Seasonality of seal predation of Cape Gannets *Morus capensis* and Cape Cormorants *Phalacrocorax capensis*.

As a result, they become guano soiled. When relieved of nest protection duty, these 'dirty' birds seek to wash themselves clean as soon as possible before they fly off to feed. Most wash in tidal rock pools where they are generally safe from seal predation. Those that wash in the open sea are frequently taken by seals.

Once gannet nest-building is over, seals can obtain few gannets until the young gannets begin to fledge. To fill this gap, seals attack Cape Cormorants, especially newly fledged birds, as they bathe near the island, and these cormorants are the main prey between November and January. At Bird Island, Cape Gannet juveniles fledge between February and April and at this time, spend large amounts of time in the water around the island where they readily fall prey to seals. In this season of glut, the seals often only bite out the organs in the lower abdomen. This leaves the still-living gannet to paddle ashore where it then stands, remains of its innards hanging out, and dies a cruel, lingering death. Predation of seabirds by seals around Bird Island largely coincides with the late-October to late-March breeding period of seals there, but most of the attacks

are by non-breeding, immature male seals.

If authorities are to meet their legal mandate to manage the biodiversity of marine vertebrates, they can no longer ignore the impact of seal predation. Given an appropriate media campaign, there is no reason to fear overly negative public reaction to the killing of seals. Unfortunately, control of seals at seabird islands currently sits in a limbo of outdated laws and in the grey area of unclarified overlap between national and provincial government jurisdictions. While organizations bicker about who has to do what and with what resources, the seal numbers have continued to rise, as have the numbers of seabirds killed per year. Clear policies and mandates for action are urgently required to curb this scourge of seals whose numbers have increased to levels exceeding those found before European settlement of southern Africa.

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## Just looking at the gulls: Kelp Gulls in the Eastern Cape

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I have to admit that, after seven years of studying the African Penguin *Spheniscus demersus*, I was a little apprehensive about locking horns with my mortal foe and new study animal, *Larus dominicanus vetula*. *Ldv*, or the Kelp Gull to you and me, didn't quite have that same charismatic appeal about it. Ok, it is also black and white, eats fish and lives by the sea, but there the similarity ends. Could a bird that steals eggs and chicks, that fires a pungent array of half digested gunge at you with pinpoint accuracy and, when defending its eggs or chicks, belts you on the cranium with the same sensual pleasure as a blow from a cricket bat, be termed charismatic?

Well, 'walking with gulls' can have its compensations. The pursuit of *Laridae* has led me to

a few wonderful places: some of the most beautiful beaches in the country, the geologically fascinating Robberg Peninsula and some stunningly scenic river estuaries. Of course, it also necessitates visiting some slightly less salubrious places: sewage works (the birders' Mecca), fish quays in the harbour, the local fast-food joint, and a couple of landfill sites. Ah, who can resist a hot summer's day at the tip, the aroma of fresh garbage in your nostrils, a million flies for company and plastic bags sailing off into the great blue yonder on a typical PE south-wester?

Well, it hasn't all been wine and roses and some serious science has been going into those halcyon afternoons at the garbage dump. In February 2003, an attempt was made to locate all sites where gulls gather to rest between the Robberg Peninsula, Plettenberg Bay, and the Fish River mouth, between Port Alfred and Hamburg. Counts of gulls in five different age groups were made at all

localities to establish the size of the population and the age structure. Preliminary results suggest that approximately 9% of the southern African Kelp Gull population is found within this region. Of the 6174 birds counted, 83% were adults.

Monthly counts have been made at localities within the vicinity of Port Elizabeth to look at seasonal trends in gull numbers. These show a peak during autumn months, possibly due to birds moving into the area after breeding. The March 2004 count recorded 3530 gulls in the area, the largest number since the counts began in January 2003, and over half of those estimated to be present in the region.

The next stage of the project is to look at post-fledging dispersal patterns of Kelp

Gull chicks. Two breeding colonies were selected for this study. The Keurbooms River mouth at Plettenberg Bay is the largest colony in the region with an estimated 1450 breeding pairs in October 2003. The Swartkops Estuary, just north of Port Elizabeth, held about 400 active nests. Dr Paul Martin has been ringing Kelp Gull chicks at this locality over the past 20 years. On 29 November 2003, 96 Kelp Gull chicks were ringed on the Swartkops by Paul, Albert Schultz, Norbert Klages and myself. Very few of the nests found in October seemed to have survived and circumstantial evidence suggests human predation from nearby Motherwell being the likely cause. The chicks were given a standard 10 mm metal ring on the right leg and a blue, plastic ring on the left. The plastic rings have a clip protruding about 5 mm on one side, forming a small 'flag'. Paul colour-ringed an additional 22 chicks on 1 January 2004, bringing the total to 118.

On 2 December 2003, a larger operation

*Where do young Kelp Gulls go after they leave these natal areas? and how far do they travel?*

was in force to ring chicks at the Keurbooms River mouth, including staff and students from Western Cape Nature Conservation Board, members of the Plettenberg Bay Bird Club and several other willing volunteers. Working in four teams, each with one ringer, we moved slowly and carefully through the colony, which is situated in vegetated coastal dunes. By the end of the manoeuvre, 934 Kelp Gull chicks were sporting a metal ring on the right leg and 728 of them also received a white plastic ring, as described above, on the left leg. While the team members may not have been warmly welcomed at the launderette afterwards, the gulls were remarkably well behaved and nobody fell victim to aerial attacks!

The key questions that we want to answer are: Where do young Kelp Gulls go after they leave these natal areas? and how far do they travel? To date, there have been 29 sightings of blue-ringed birds and 145 of white-ringed birds. Fourteen of these were found dead or sick, the rest having been seen alive and well in the field. It is likely that not all of the sightings refer to different birds. Taking account of those seen at the same locality on different dates, a conservative estimate of 23 of the Swartkops birds and 114 of the Keurbooms birds have so far been recorded. This represents 19% of those ringed at the Swartkops and 16% of those marked at the Keurbooms River mouth.

Eight of the Keurbooms birds were found dead at the breeding colony in December and therefore failed to fledge. Three travelled westwards, two reaching Mossel Bay and one the Touws River mouth at Wilderness, while 96 have been recorded east of the Keurbooms River mouth. The farthest travelled bird so far was recorded in East London, on 6 February 2004. This is a distance of 524 km from the nest site. Of the Swartkops birds, 15 have been recorded south or west of the natal areas, the furthest having been at Van Stadens River mouth, 37 km away as the gull flies. Three have remained within the Swartkops Estuary and five have been recorded to the north of the Swartkops,

the farthest being 11 km from home within the development area of the new port of Ngqura, at the mouth of the Coega River.

It is early days yet and we hope to get many more sightings of colour-ringed birds before we can build up a more realistic picture of dispersal patterns. And for this we need your help! Whenever you visit the coast, please look out for colour-ringed Kelp Gulls. The rings are not always immediately visible and a scan with binoculars or, ideally, a telescope may be required, especially to see the blue ones. If you do see one, please record the date, locality, age of the bird (young or adult) and the colour and position of the ring (e.g., blue ring, left leg). Your sightings can be reported to: SAFRING, Avian Demography Unit, University of Cape Town, Rondebosch, 7701 or telephone (021) 650 2422, or e-mail: safring@adu.uct.ac.za

Further details are available from the author's address, telephone (041) 504 4281/2877 or by e-mail to Philip.Whittington@upe.ac.za or coastal@upe.ac.za

Your sightings will help to build a picture of what Kelp Gulls in the southeastern Cape do when they first venture out into the big, bad world. Have fun and remember that it's not every day you get a good excuse to lie on the beach and stare at all the gulls.

### Acknowledgements

The University of Port Elizabeth and the National Research Foundation are gratefully acknowledged for their financial support. Johan Huisamen organised volunteers and boat transport for the ringing at the Keurbooms River mouth. The Nelson Mandela Metropolitan Municipality provided boat transport for access to the island in the Swartkops River. Many thanks to all those who helped with the bird ringing at Plettenberg Bay. Albert Schultz went beyond the call of duty to produce over 1100 plastic rings. I am grateful to Dieter Oschadleus of SAFRING for sending raw materials for the plastic rings at very short notice. I am grateful to all those who have sent in their sightings of colour-marked gulls; please keep up the good work!

## Honour among thieves?: cooperative predation in Kelp Gulls

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During five years of fieldwork on South African islands, I frequently witnessed predation by Kelp Gulls *Larus dominicanus* on the eggs and small chicks of the African Penguin *Spheniscus demersus*. On occasions at Dassen Island, on the West Coast, the gulls gave the appearance of working as a team. One bird would walk around the penguin, gradually edging closer, causing the penguin to lean forward to threaten its would-be assailant. If the penguin leaned too far forward and revealed its egg or eggs, a second gull would nimbly nip in on the 'blind side' and be winging its way, penguin egg clamped firmly between its mandibles, in the wink of an eye. The first bird would immediately follow. But did this really represent teamwork? Do these avian partners in crime actually work together or does one merely cash-in on the initial hard work of the other?

Well, on Bird Island, Algoa Bay, there are clear signs of an organised crime syndicate at work amongst the Laridae, and I got an answer to this question on 4 February 2004. Mark Ralph and I were watching a pair of Kelp Gulls that regularly patrol the area in front of the island's accommodation block as they searched for unguarded eggs or other tasty morsels among the nesting penguins. Eventually, they singled out a penguin that was sitting on its nest, minding its own business. The gulls stood on either side of the intended victim, inching closer and closer. The penguin turned from one to the other, rather like a spectator at a

tennis match, until one of the gulls walked around to the back of the bird. The penguin turned on its nest to face it, but did not reveal an egg, preventing the second gull from taking advantage of its partner's diversion tactics.

However, where brains fail, brute force can succeed. The second gull moved in, and wrenched an egg out from under the sitting penguin. The gull promptly dropped its ill-gotten gains, whereupon the first bird took up the egg and walked away with it, stopping about 30 m from the scene of the crime. We anticipated at this point that the first gull would fly off and gorge itself on the egg. But no, there is honour among thieves after all. After breaking the egg on a rock, the two gulls shared the spoils equally without any sign of competition or bickering between them. A juvenile Kelp Gull arrived and solicited from one of the adults but was quickly chased away.

Was this a flash in the pan (excuse the pun) or an indication that Kelp Gulls really do engage in organised crime? It is not known for certain whether the two adults concerned were a breeding pair as neither of the birds was ringed. Observations of colour-marked birds may shed more light on the criminal activities of this species and tell us whether true teamwork is the norm or the exception.

Meanwhile, police are looking for two suspects of medium build, white plumage with black bomber-jackets, yellow bills . . .

*. . . the two gulls shared the spoils equally without any sign of competition or bickering between them*



## Is that a Kelp, Cape or Khoisan Gull?

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The answer could be yes to all three! We could also add Dominican, and Southern Blackbacked Gull and still be talking about the same bird! What a mess. Having to write and talk about this bird regularly I applaud the dropping of the long-winded Southern Blackbacked, Dominican, reflected in the present scientific name *Larus dominicanus*, has been universally dropped as birders no longer appreciate that the clothing of Dominican friars was, like this gull's plumage, black and white. Kelp was a nice short name – Anglo-Saxons like four-letter words! Just as we got used to it, taxonomists indicated that the African subspecies *vetula* may in fact be a wholly distinct species. A Dutch birder has given this taxon, still not yet fully acknowledged as a species, the name Cape Gull and this is already being used in a local field guide. Where was the consultation? Is the name really appropriate? Can't we do better?

I contend that the term Cape be dropped when vernacular names are changed (though, in terms of those where use is already traditional, retained until appropriate alternatives are found). Formerly, when little was known about species distributions and biology, Cape was a useful indication that the first named specimens were exported from Cape Town. In fact it often meant southern African as in its use for Cape Buffalo. It also indicated 'seas near Cape Town' as in Cape Hen and Cape Pigeon, now Whitechinned and Pintado petrels respectively. Now that we know so much more about the biology of our vertebrates, we should be able to come up with names that better connect a bird to its prime breeding range. The continued use of "Cape" is parochial. Check an atlas and see

just how many Capes there are! Certainly I appreciate that we already have Cape Gannet and Cape Cormorant and I am content to accept these vernacular names until such time as there is a global revision of the names for the gannets and cormorants.

Having disagreed with Cape, and if we must have a vernacular distinction between the taxa *vetula* and (nominate) *dominicanus*,

*Let us have a geographically appropriate English name for the commonest gull in Cape Town*

then the onus is on me to suggest a suitable alternative name. I have given the global naming of gulls

some thought and, where possible, prefer names that, in some way, indicate the breeding range. To me, the best named gull is the Andean Gull *Larus serranus* in which both vernacular and scientific names indicate its range. I also approve of the current trend to use Baltic Gull to replace '(Scandinavian or nominate) Lesser Blackbacked Gull' (what a mouthful!).

A new name should also take into account the need for the naming, or renaming, of gulls with similar or broadly overlapping ranges. Thus, when seeking a name for *L. d. vetula*, I had to give consideration to the Hartlaub's Gull, *Larus hartlaubii*. That brings me to another pet hate: the use of the names of long-dead taxonomists or explorers as vernacular names for birds. Hartlaub is to my mind fully honoured in the scientific name *hartlaubii*. Let us have a geographically appropriate English name for the commonest gull in Cape Town.

Both *hartlaubii* and *vetula* have their populations centered on the Atlantic coast of southern Africa. The range of *hartlaubii* is closely tied to the distribution of the kelp *Ecklonia* and kelp fly maggots feeding on washed up *Ecklonia* and other seaweed is an

important food source for this small gull. I considered the name *Ecklonia* Gull but rejected it as not being geographically explicit or even understood by most people. However, the distribution of *hartlaubii* lies entirely within the Benguela marine system, a term that is widely recognized. Tentatively, I favoured the name Benguelan Gull for *Larus hartlaubii*.

The problem then arose of what to name *vetula* which also has its global population centred on islands along the Benguela coastline. Here I was helped by the fact that *vetula* has a breeding range that extends well to the east of that of *hartlaubii*. It breeds on islands in Algoa Bay whereas *hartlaubii* does not breed east of Cape Agulhas. I then sought a name that would encompass this wider range. The one that seemed most appropriate to me was Khoisan as the range of *vetula* pretty much agrees with the coastal distribution of the Khoisan people at the time of first written descriptions of southern Africa.

What is written above may seem a long-winded way of simply saying that I suggest we change the name of our local form of the Kelp Gull to Khoisan Gull, and the name of the Hartlaub's Gull to Benguelan Gull.

While I am at it, what about other gulls that occur in southern Africa: Greyheaded, Franklin's, Sabine's, nominate Kelp, Black-headed, Herring, (I accepted Baltic earlier) and maybe Heughlin's? And why stop with southern Africa? What about the White-eyed and Sooty Gulls of the northeastern coast? They in turn lead me on to some others but I do prefer to leave the mess of most North Atlantic gulls to those living in the area.

Adult Greyheaded Gulls have a grey masked head when breeding. This is unique in the family and makes this name entirely appropriate. Furthermore, the occurrence of the species in both Africa and South America renders a regional name inappropriate. It has been suggested that the two continental forms, presently represented by subspecies, should be treated as distinct species since interbreeding no longer occurs. In the event that two species are recognised, I propose

names that avoid a qualifier of Greyheaded. For the South American species, Plata or Plate Gull would be appropriate in view of its prevalence in the Rio Plata estuary (when not breeding). For the African form I propose Rift Gull, in reference to the lakes of the African Rift Valley which support the largest breeding populations in Africa.

Given my dislike of the use of human surnames, I make the following suggestions. For *Larus pipixcans*, currently Franklin's Gull, I think Prairie Gull would be most appropriate as reflecting its primary breeding range in North America. For Sabine's Gull *Larus sabinii*, I suggest Tundra Gull. While I am on a roll with biogeographic names for North American gulls, I would like to suggest the name Muskeg Gull for Bonaparte's Gull *Larus philadelphia* which, uniquely among gulls, nests in trees around muskeg swamps.

Regretfully I would retain the current name for (nominate) Kelp Gull, though the term could equally apply to many other gull species. I would prefer the name Sub-Antarctic Gull, because I studied this bird at Marion Island, but acknowledge that it occurs well beyond the sub-Antarctic zone in both South America and New Zealand. I hesitate to suggest any changes for the names of seabirds common around the North Atlantic, so Blackheaded and Herring stand for the time being and let others sort out the current taxonomic status and concurrent vernacular mess there. Heughlin's Gull, part of the present taxonomic confusion over the Herring/Lesser Blackbacked group of gulls, is being increasingly referred to as the Siberian Gull.

Then we come to those gulls which are, at least at some stage, uniformly darkly plumaged. The so-called White-eyed Gull *Larus leucoptalmus* has a dark eye. This is ringed with a white 'eye-rim', a feature shared to varying degree by a number of other gulls. I suggest the name Red Sea Gull since this reflects the fact that this species is effectively endemic to the Red Sea where it undoubtedly evolved. Its near relative, the Sooty Gull *Larus hemprichii*, is not mark-

edly sootier in colour than a number of 'dusky' gulls. It is effectively confined to that northern, more saline, section of the Western Indian Ocean (and its offshoots the Arabian Gulf and the Gulf of Aden) generally referred to as the Arabian Sea. Thus I favour renaming this species the Arabian Sea Gull.

While we are considering dusky gulls, I suggest that the Grey Gull *L. modestus* be renamed Atacaman Gull in reflection of its restricted colonial breeding in the Atacama Desert of northern Chile and because its nonbreeding range is largely confined to the coast of this desert. The Heermann's Gull *L. heermanni* I suggest be renamed the Raza Gull because 90% of the population breeds on Isla Raza in the Gulf of California. (Use of the island name may also influence Mexican authorities to grant greater conservation attention to this locality.) The name of the

third southern America dusky gull, the Lava Gull, is sufficiently distinctive and appropriate to be retained.

Past taxonomic confusion, the need for double-adjective names for similar species, and the frequent collection of gull specimens far from breeding areas, led to many species retaining the name of their describer, more so than in any other bird family. This was a convenience when only taxonomists were interested in the birds. It is grossly outmoded in the present day. I propose here that the issue of appropriate English vernacular names for the entire gull family be reconsidered. Specifically the aim should be to replace personal, long and generic names with clearer, shorter names generally giving reference to the key region or habitat in which the species breeds.



"He seems a bit off his food today."

## Feeding on roads and associated mortality in the Hamerkop

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In the first week of April 2004, an increased number of sightings of Hamerkop *Scopus umbretta* was noticed in the Ladysmith area of Kwa Zulu-Natal. This appeared to be mainly due to a sudden concentration of birds at the roadside and not as a result of a sudden influx of the species into the area. In a short stretch of road of about 10 km, 13 birds were seen.

Closer examination revealed that the birds were hunting frogs which were hopping across the road. The birds were landing on the tarred road and picking off the frogs as they crossed the road. I initially thought that this was a localized observation until I was told by a work colleague that he had noticed six Hamerkop road kills on the main road between Durban and Ladysmith. Six birds

killed on a stretch of road 250 km long is quite a significant number, and I imagine that this method of feeding by Hamerkops, and the resultant road kills, may impact negatively on populations of the bird.

I was interested to know if other areas of the country had noticed a similar occurrence, so I posted a message on Sabirdnet. A few replies were received, one of which suggested that the birds were feeding on Common Platannas *Xenopus laevis* which search for new bodies of water in wet weather (Liz Scott, Transvaal Museum). As we had had some heavy rainfall recently, this seemed probable.

Similar activity was also noticed at Kruger Park Lodge Hazyview (Rob Burnett) after heavy rainfall.



## Down colour of nestling African snake-eagles and the Bateleur

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Steyn (1982) described and illustrated in detail the downy nestlings and the subsequent feather development of Brown Snake-Eagle *Circaetus cinereus*, Black-chested Snake-Eagle *Circaetus pectoralis* and the Bateleur *Terathopius ecaudatus*. The down colour of the two snake-eagles is white on hatching, in contrast to the two-tone pattern of the Bateleur which has a creamy head and is dark brown on the rest of its upperparts (Figure 1).

Until recently, the breeding biology of both the Southern Banded Snake-Eagle *Circaetus fasciolatus* and Western Banded Snake-Eagle *Circaetus cinerascens* was

poorly known and their first down colour on hatching was undescribed (Brown et al. 1982; Steyn 1982). Subsequently Edwards (1985) gave breeding details from Zimbabwe in which he described a small chick as white, changing to fawn-brown when 3–4 weeks old. Parkes (1998), also from Zimbabwe, described a small chick as brownish-grey. There is thus a discrepancy in the two descriptions, but Edwards viewed his nest from an adjacent tree initially and may not necessarily have had a good view.

The downy nestling of Southern Banded Snake-Eagle remained undescribed until 2002, when Hugh Chittenden and Derek



**Figure 1.** A recently hatched Bateleur to show the distinctive two-tone down pattern. Photograph by Peter Steyn.

Coley made observations at a nest in Kwa-Zulu-Natal and forwarded colour slides to me. The nestling at five days old had a whitish head and was greyish-brown on the rest of its upperparts (Figure 2), a pattern that is similar to that of the Bateleur nestling of the same age, although not as dark dorsally. As the chick developed, the down on its upperparts became paler greyish and the subsequent rapid feather development on the anterior part of the dorsal surface was typical of the other snake-eagles and the Bateleur.

From what is now known, the down colour of Brown Snake-Eagle and Black-chested Snake-Eagle is white on hatching and remains so even when feathers begin to emerge. The down colour of both Western Banded Snake-Eagle and Southern Banded Snake-Eagle appears to be greyish with, in the case of the latter, a whitish head. Further observations are needed to confirm that Western Banded Snake-Eagle also has a two-tone pattern, which I suspect will be the case.

Brown et al. (1982) considered the Bateleur to be a specialised offshoot of snake-eagle stock on the basis of erectile feathers on the head, heavily scaled tarsi, its crowing voice and feather development of the nestling which closely matches that of snake-



**Figure 2.** A nestling Southern Banded Snake-Eagle at five days old to show the similarity of its down pattern to that of the Bateleur. Photograph by Derek Coley.

eagles. Perhaps the match of its two-tone down pattern to Southern Banded Snake-Eagle, and possibly also to Western Banded Snake-Eagle, is further evidence of its snake-eagle relationship.

#### Acknowledgements

I am indebted to Hugh Chittenden for supplying details of his observations and both he and Derek Coley gave me colour slides of the nest they photographed, a first time for the elusive and little known Southern Banded Snake-Eagle.

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## Birds and environmental education in KZN

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About 12 months ago, I started a project to visit and speak to as many school environment clubs as possible. Once this was off the ground, I was asked to speak to Biology and Science classes as well. To date, five schools have been visited with more than 300 children being exposed to birding and bird ringing. About 50% of the children are from previously disadvantaged communities. During the forthcoming year, numerous other schools have been booked and others will be revisited. Hopefully, through this we will be able to encourage children to look after the environment and, who knows, maybe there is a budding environmentalist amongst them that may not otherwise be found. In my experience, a bird in the hand is worth more than a picture!

The local branch of WESSA has come on board by sponsoring prizes to be given to the children who are encouraged to submit a story/poem about birds (mainly for the 10–12 year olds). This has a positive effect on the children who use all the data collected from the birds caught.

The school clubs have now joined the Wildlife and Environment Society of SA (WESSA) as members and are thereby further exposed to environmental issues. One School, Creston College, has set aside a fairly large patch of ground consisting of pristine coastal grassland and coastal scrub with a small patch of wetland. To date, more than 50 birds have been caught and ringed here while talking to the children, including Bluemantled Flycatcher, Terrestrial Bulbul

and Pygmy Kingfisher. Two 15-year old boys from this school are very keen to join us on most weekend ringing sessions and have actually ringed about 60 birds each to date. These are some of the children who need to be encouraged.

At other schools, WESSA has donated indigenous trees that will eventually start to attract more birds to the schools, thus exposing children to unfamiliar birds. Other institutions, like the local Rotary Club and garden

*I encourage as many birders as possible to start similar education programmes because the results are so rewarding*

clubs, have been given ringing demonstrations. One topic of these talks is the projects that we are

involved in and how they can get involved with monitoring birds, such as the Pied Manikin Project. In this project the birds are ringed with both metal and coloured rings and members of the public are encouraged to report sightings to me. Other projects involve Gurney's Sugarbird and European (Barn) Swallow.

I encourage as many birders as possible to start similar education programmes because the results are so rewarding. I know that BirdLife Port Natal has a strong junior section that teaches children about birding, and I am sure other clubs also have education programmes, but I know of a lot of clubs that are more interested in finding new birds for lifelists than sharing knowledge with others.

I would like to thank WESSA Southern KZN for their assistance with the work that I am doing and hope to continue for some time to come.



**A plague of *Locustella*?  
– influx of River Warblers in northern South Africa**

**Etienne Marais<sup>1</sup> & Faansie Peacock<sup>2</sup>**

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The River Warbler *Locustella fluviatilis* has generally been regarded as a rarity with fewer than 20 confirmed pre-1991 records for southern Africa. Since then, the number of records has increased substantially, and Kriek (in litt.), Herremans (1994) and others drew attention to the possibility that this species has been widely overlooked in its south-

ern African non-breeding range, owing to its extremely secretive nature, specific habitat requirements and the difficulty in recognizing its calls and song. An increase in records and extent of its range have also been noted in the Palearctic breeding range (Cramp et al. 1992).

**Table 1.** River Warbler records, Pretoria area, March and April 2004.

Site	Area	QDS	Observer/s	Date	Birds observed	Minimum birds present	Nearest other site	Distance from nearest other site
1	Pienaarsrivier	2528AB	RM	15 Mar	2	7	2	6.9 km
			EM & FP	20 Mar	3–4			
			RM	21 Mar	7–9			
			?	3 Apr	1			
2	Pienaarsrivier	2528AA	EM & FP	20 Mar	3	4	3	700 m
			FP & RV	26 Mar	4			
3	Pienaarsrivier	2528AA	FP & RV	26 Mar	1	1	2	700 m
4	Pienaarsrivier	2528AA	FP & RV	26 Mar	2	2	5	620 m
5	Pienaarsrivier	2528AA	FP & RV	26 Mar	4	4	6	600 m
6	Pienaarsrivier	2528AA	EM & FP	20 Mar	1	3	5	600 m
			RM	21 Mar	2			
			FP & RV	26 Mar	3			
7	Pienaarsrivier	2528AA	FP & RV	26 Mar	1	1	6	670 m
8	Pienaarsrivier	2528AA	SR	3 Apr	1	1	7	2.3 km
9	Pienaarsrivier		RM	21 Mar	1	1	8	6 km
10	Vaalkop 1	2527AD	EM	23 Mar	1	1	11	635 m
			AM	28 Mar	1			
			RG & PvZ	4 Apr	1			
11	Vaalkop 2	2527AD	EM	23 Apr	1	1	10	635 m
12	Vaalkop 3	2527AD	EM	1 Apr	1	1	13	1.1 km
13	Vaalkop 4	2527AD	EM	1 Apr	1	1	12	1.1 km
			RG & PvZ	4 Apr	1			
14	Buffelsdrift 1	2528CB	RG	30 Mar	1	1	15	2 km
15	Buffelsdrift 2	2528CB	RG	5 Apr	1	1	14	2 km

Observers: RM=Richard Montinaro, EM=Etienne Marais, FP=Faansie Peacock, RV=Ronel Viljoen, SR=Selwyn Rautenbach, AM=Andre Marx, RG=Rob Geddes, PvZ=Pieter van Zyl.

River Warblers are now known to occur regularly at certain localities in the Pretoria area, and several birders, under the guidance of Mostert Kriek, have been engaged in a process of monitoring this species for some years. Owing to the paucity of records in South Africa, the species' small, highly localised territories (Cramp et al. 1992), and the ease with which moulting birds are disturbed, the localities have not been made known to the general birding community.

### Past and present records

In South Africa, River Warblers are most easily located from mid-March onwards, when, on the completion of moult and in preparation for northward migration, the species becomes vocal, particularly at dawn and dusk. In addition to the characteristic insect-like song (presumably produced by males), diagnostic contact and alarm calls assist in locating this species (see below). Between 1998 and 2004, regular searches in suitable habitat, during periods of peak calling activity, produced only a handful of records north of Pretoria, in quarter-degree grid cells squares 2528AA, AB, AC and CB (Mostert Kriek in litt.; F.P. unpubl. data). However, during March and April 2004, an unusually large number of River Warblers were located in northern South Africa, with at least 30 birds recorded within 100 km of Pretoria, as well as unusual numbers further north. The Pretoria records are summarised in Table 1.

In the same period, birders from BirdLife Northern Gauteng found a single River Warbler near the Crocodile River near Dwaalboom (Thabazimbi), on 24 March. A visit to

northeastern Limpopo province and Northern Kruger National Park produced 16 records (all singing males) between 26 March and 2 April. (Montinaro unpubl. data). Individual birds were recorded from Albasini Dam and Polokwane Game Reserve.

### Observations

At the main study site, the warblers frequented thickets of dense *Ziziphus*, *Grewia* and *Dichrostachys* scrub, herbaceous growth and lush, tall grass under the canopy of taller *Acacia* and *Combretum* spp., on a clay substrate, with secluded open soil surfaces for foraging. Some of the sites were in well-vegetated lower-lying depressions on the edge of flooded grasslands, and all sites were within c.300 m of the Pienaars River. Males' characteristic, rhythmic singing commenced at 05:45–06:10 and continued with fluctuating intensity and frequency until c.09:00, after which only occasional bursts of song were uttered until approximately 11:00. In addition, diagnostic 'pwit' or 'tsit' alarm calls were given regularly, repeated singly or in a series ('tsit-tsit-tsit . . .'), often in response to the singing of a nearby male (thus implying a territorial function), or to disturbances. Field observations showed that non-singing birds (probably females or juveniles) are often closely associated with the sites where males are observed singing, with two birds calling from as little as 1 m apart in some cases. This indicates that a level of gregariousness exists on the non-breeding grounds, contrary to the current belief that River Warblers are solitary outside the breeding season.

### Densities and population size

Singing males seemed to consistently concentrate in clusters of 3–4 birds in a small area (earshot), with an apparent absence of birds in intervening areas. Singing males were often as little as 20–25 m apart, creating high local densities of 2–4 birds/ha, but the aggregation of singing males, secretive nature of the birds and inaccessible and variable habitat make detailed estimation of



population densities complicated. Only one area (a segment of 3.1 km on the north side of the Pienaars River) was surveyed with any degree of thoroughness. This linear sample produced a minimum of 15 birds (10 males), i.e., 1 bird/207 m. Considering the likelihood that females and silent birds were probably widely overlooked, a realistic total for this linear sample is likely to be at least 20 birds. Since the habitat is similar on both sides of the river, it might be assumed that a further 20 birds would be present on the southern side of the river, giving a total of 40 birds/3.1 km or 12.9 birds/km of suitable river frontage. If this seems high, it should be noted that this sample was obtained outside of the optimal time of day, i.e., when most River Warblers have stopped vocalising.

The ad hoc samples at Vaalkop (Elands River), Buffelsdrift (upper Pienaars River) and on the Crocodile river near Thabazimibi, suggest that River Warblers occurred widely in suitable habitat across the region. While we have insufficient data for a conclusive population estimate, we calculated a probable range within which the true figure may lie.

The area we considered lies between 27°18'E and 28°48'E, and south of 25°S, and covers about 23 000 km<sup>2</sup> of the Limpopo Basin, mostly at altitudes below 1100 m. Significant portions of the lower Pienaars, Elands, and parts of the Crocodile and Hex rivers in eastern North West province, offer similar riverine habitat to that found at the study localities (pers. obs.). Excluding heavily populated areas, and areas with steep topography, the above-mentioned rivers have a river frontage of at least 271 km. Assuming that the density found at our main survey site on the Pienaars River is a maximum, and that the actual mean density along these rivers lies in the range 20–50% of this maximum, the total number of River Warblers that were present would be within a range of 700–1700 birds. Note that this excludes extensive suitable habitat along smaller drainages in the area, where the species has been recorded in previous years. The real total may, therefore, have been considerably greater.

## Discussion

The unusually high numbers recorded during this season is likely to be an effect of variations in weather patterns that reduce suitable habitat in parts of the traditional over-wintering grounds, while creating an abundance of suitable habitat for River Warblers in other areas. An interesting and unexpected rainfall pattern occurred during the summer season of 2003/2004, with widespread drought conditions over much of southern Africa. It is worth noting that central Mozambique – including the Zambezi Valley – as well as northern Botswana and parts of Zambia, received much less than the average rainfall in the period September to January.

Much of the region then experienced above-average rainfall from mid-January to mid-April, including most of Limpopo province. This resulted in large areas developing typical habitat for over-wintering River Warblers during mid- to late summer, when this species arrives in southern Africa. At our main survey locality, the Pienaars River, widespread flooding occurred, creating floodplain-edge habitat often frequented by River Warblers. A reflection of the unusually suitable conditions was the presence of relatively large numbers of several other generally uncommon species that moved into the area, examples being Harlequin Quail, Corn Crake (see article in this issue), Common White-throat, Thrush Nightingale and Striped Crake.

## Areas for further research

We have reported field observations and provided a preliminary discussion of environmental conditions and apparent trends, as well as possible explanations for the phenomenon observed during the 2003/04 season. Longer-term data and more comprehensive population statistics (taking into consideration factors such as fluctuations in populations of the Palearctic breeding population, migration routes, etc.) would be needed to draw unequivocal conclusions about the population dynamics of this enigmatic species.

We urge other birdwatchers who have made any observations on this species to share them with us, preferably by e-mail at [riverwarblers@birding.co.za](mailto:riverwarblers@birding.co.za).

### Acknowledgements

We would like to thank a number of people for providing us with information about River Warbler sightings, in particular, Richard Montinaro, Rob Geddes, Andre Marx, Selwyn Rautenbach, Rynetta Coetzee, Frans van Vuuren, Joe Grosel and Pieter van Zyl. Furthermore, we thank Mostert Kriek for providing valuable background information on this species and Marc Herremans for his comments and suggestions.

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## A plethora of Corn Crakes

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The Corn Crake *Crex crex* is traditionally regarded as an uncommon to rare summer migrant to South Africa, with the highest density in KwaZulu-Natal. The species' historical scarcity is borne out by atlas data which indicate that during the atlas period (1987–92) the species was recorded only 129 times in 77 quarter-degree grid cells, 40 of which were in South Africa (Harrison et al. 1997).

During the summer of 2003/04, a marked increase in the number of sightings was noted (as was the case for several other uncommon species; see article on River Warblers in this issue). Many birds were recorded from KwaZulu-Natal. Even more significant was the number of records from well-birded localities in Mpumalanga province. We collated reports posted on SABirdnet and requested birders to submit records to us. We also analysed data from BiG/PCC bird monitoring programme. Some records, in well-

birded localities, are undoubtedly of the same bird.

The largest number of records came from KwaZulu-Natal, with at least 44 sightings, mainly in the Durban area, KZN north coast, and Richards Bay area. There were also records from Kokstad, Pietermaritzburg, Midmar, Himeville, Creighton and Underberg in the KZN midlands.

Mpumalanga produced at least 41 records, although sightings in Wakkerstroom were so regular that people stopped reporting them. Three organised outings to Middelpunt Wetland near Belfast, Mpumalanga, all resulted in a number of Corn Crakes being flushed, with about eight different birds flushed on 24 January. Two records came from the Sabie area, and a record was received from Mkhombo Dam in northwestern Mpumalanga.

Limpopo province had nine records from widely scattered localities and Gauteng pro-

duced eight records, mainly from Marievale Bird Sanctuary. The Free State province produced six records, three from Seekoeivlei Wetland near Memel. The Eastern Cape produced five records, three from the Port Elizabeth area.

In total, we are aware of 113 records of Corn Crane from the period 9 December 2003 to 15 April 2004, which represents more records for South Africa than the total recorded during the atlas period (1987–92).

It is difficult to identify specific reasons for this apparent irruption of Corn Crakes in South Africa. It is possible that short-term population increases in the species' breeding range may have influenced abundance in our region, but other factors are believed to be primarily responsible. The summer of 2004 had unusual weather, with very dry conditions early in the season, particularly in northern parts, which could have 'pushed' birds further south than usual, and perhaps

also caused them to be concentrated in areas with suitable habitat.

### Acknowledgements

We would like to thank all who sent us their sightings and also those who made their records known via SABirdnet. We thank Pieter van Zyl of the PCC/BiG Electronic Bird Monitoring Programme for extracting records for us.

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## Seasonal movements and distribution of the Whitebellied Sunbird in western and central Namibia

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The Whitebellied Sunbird *Cinnyris talatala* occurs in woodland and bush in the northern and eastern parts of southern Africa. Its presence is usually easily detected by its distinctive vocalizations. Roberts' (Maclean 1993) and most of the fieldguides indicate its range covering northern Namibia, southward to the central parts, well to the south of Windhoek. There are old records from Okahandja in central Namibia at latitude 22°S, as well as from Sesfontein on the Hoanib River in the dry northwest (Skead 1967). However, during the atlas period, Whitebellied Sunbirds were recorded in Namibia from only the northern and northeastern parts, south to approximately 21°S. Except for northeastern

Kaokoland, no Whitebellied Sunbirds were recorded from the area to the west of 16°E (ASAB2). The atlas records were from the Broadleaved Tree-and-shrub Savanna biome and marginally from *Acacia* Tree-and-shrub Savanna, in the less arid regions of Namibia (Mendelsohn et al. 2002). Vegetation to the south and west of the range, as indicated in the atlas, consists of various types of arid *Acacia* shrubland in the south, and arid *Acacia-Commiphora-Colophospermum* shrubland in the west. These types of vegetation seem to be unsuitable habitat for Whitebellied Sunbirds when compared to that within the atlas range.

### New records in western and central Namibia

Despite seemingly unsuitable habitat, the author recorded Whitebellied Sunbirds at various localities in western and central Namibia during the dry seasons of 2002 and 2003 (see distribution map). During the winter of 2002, in July, several Whitebellied Sunbirds were unexpectedly recorded while feeding on blossoms of riparian ana trees *Faidherbia albida*, in the Okahandja River at Okahandja. This record is in central Namibia at 22°S and ±110 km south of its range according to the atlas. The birds were detected by their 'tzick' call, usually uttered at take-off and occasionally in flight. The highly distinctive 'chewy' call was less often heard. Birds of both sexes, including juveniles, were present in approximately equal numbers, and occurred at a relative high density, outnumbering sympatric Marico and Dusky sunbirds by far. If I had not recognized their vocalizations, the birds would probably have remained undetected as they were mostly silent and inconspicuous, feeding out of sight in the upper part of tall and densely foliated trees.

*F. albida* is almost unique in that it flowers in dry winter months when virtually no other plant is in flower (Carr 1976). The fact that Whitebellied Sunbirds were found feeding in it, prompted the author to search other stands of *F. albida*. In Namibia, these trees occur in fairly high densities in riverine woodland along the west-flowing ephemeral rivers of the arid western and northwestern parts, outside the known range of the Whitebellied Sunbird. Stands of *F. albida* at the following localities were visited regularly and searched for Whitebellied Sunbirds, from July 2002 to January 2004 (see also Fig. 1):

Kuiseb River (Solitaire–Walvis Bay road, 2315BD)  
 Khan River (Usakos, 2215BA; E tiro, 2115DD) (visited only twice)  
 Okahandja River (a tributary of the Swakop

River, Okahandja, 2216BB)  
 Ugab River (Uis–Khorixas road, 2014DD)  
 Aba-Huab River (near Twyfelfontein, 2014CB)  
 Huab River (Khorixas–Palmwag road, 2014AC)  
 Hoanib River (at its confluence with the Obias River, 1913AD)

At all these localities, ample time was spent endeavouring to locate Whitebellied Sunbirds by listening for their distinctive calls. Except for the Kuiseb River, Whitebellied Sunbirds were recorded regularly at all the localities from July to October 2002 and June to October 2003. These periods coincided with the flowering season of *F. albida*. Good views of the birds were obtained, especially from road and rail bridges, which served as high vantage points at most of the localities. Apart from a few exceptions, all records were of birds feeding on the blossoms of *F. albida*. The exceptions were a few cases where birds fed on flowers of a few perennial plants: African Chestnut *Sterculia africana* and the alien Wild Tobacco *Nicotiana glauca*. Several specimens of the latter were constantly visited by Whitebellied Sunbirds and Dusky Sunbirds *Cinnyris fusca*. At all the localities, Whitebellied Sunbirds occurred in sympatry with Dusky Sunbirds and, at the Okahandja and Ugab rivers, with the Marico Sunbird *Cinnyris mariquensis*.

In central Namibia, Whitebellied Sunbirds were also recorded unexpectedly at two localities during the study period. In the city of Windhoek (2217CA), they were sparsely recorded during July and August 2002, and again in September 2003. They were observed feeding on flowering garden plants and on the exotic bottlebrush *Callistemon* sp. Near Kalkrand, 180 km south-southeast of Windhoek, in Kalahari shrubland, they were recorded during September 2002 and September 2003, in a dense patch of mature Camel Thorns *Acacia erioloba*. This patch of *A. erioloba* is situated on the fossil banks of the Skaap River, providing a possible migra-

tion route from its source in the mountains south of Windhoek. Whitebellied Sunbirds occurred in sympatry with Marico and Dusky sunbirds and were seen feeding together on flowers of the mistletoe *Tapinanthus oleifolius*, and in a nearby farm garden on exotic *Callistemon* sp.

### Discussion

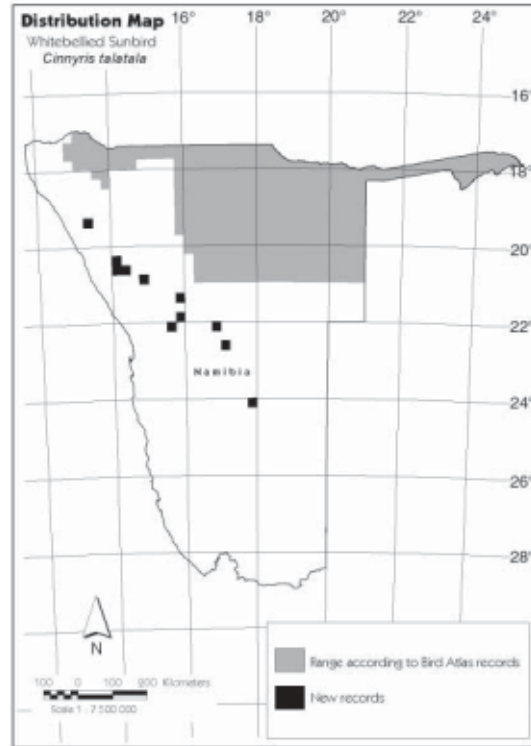
No Whitebellied Sunbirds could be found in western regions other than in the immediate vicinity of west-flowing ephemeral rivers with *F. albida* in the riverine vegetation. The birds were recorded only during the dry winter months, which coincided with the flowering season of *F. albida*. In south-central areas, records coincided with the flowering season of *A. erioloba* and other *Acacia* species. However, in the veld, only flowers of the parasitic *T. oleifolius* growing on branches of *A. erioloba* were seen being visited. Searching other dense stands of *A. erioloba* near Rehoboth, which were devoid of mistletoe, produced no Whitebellied Sunbirds. This was likewise the case north of Omaruru, where in blooming *Acacia* woodland, only the mistletoe flowers were utilised. Although the mistletoes at the Kalkrand locality were in flower throughout the study period, Whitebellied Sunbirds were only present while the *A. erioloba* were also in flower.

The occurrence of Whitebellied Sunbirds in western and central areas is clearly only during the non-breeding season (ASAB2). They are present June–October in western and north-central areas, with peak numbers in July and August. In the south-central area, they are present only during September. In western and north-central areas, their occurrence is linked to the flowering season of *F. albida* and in south-central areas to that of *Acacia* species, particularly *A. erioloba*.

Although no Whitebellied Sunbirds were

found during the study period at the Kuiseb River locality, it is suspected to occur there during the dry season. Stands of mature *F. albida* are present in the riverine woodland of the Kuiseb River. This is likewise the case in the Gaub River to the south, a major tributary of the Kuiseb, which marks the southernmost point of distribution of *F. albida* in Namibia. Although only a few selected localities were searched, Whitebellied Sunbirds are most likely to occur seasonally all along these rivers, including the Hoarusib in Kaokoland in the northwest. Juvenile Whitebellied Sunbirds are also subject to seasonal movements as they were recorded at all localities.

All birds, of both sexes and age groups, were rather unobtrusive and mostly silent,



**Figure 1.** Distribution map of recent sightings of Whitebellied Sunbirds.

except for occasional vocalizations as described above. This is contrary to observations elsewhere in the range where the species is described as highly vocal at all times (Maclean 1993).

It has been reported that Whitebellied Sunbirds are dominated and displaced at food sources by the Marico Sunbird (Skead 1967; ASAB2). This is certainly not the case at their wintering grounds in western and central Namibia where Whitebellied Sunbirds were observed at all localities feeding amicably with Dusky Sunbirds and, where present, with Marico Sunbirds.

It is unlikely that the records, as described above, represent any recent range extensions or irregular movements. The fact that there are old records from Sesfontein and Okahandja proves that the Whitebellied Sunbird was merely overlooked in western and central areas in recent years, probably due to its rather unobtrusive habits and habitat preferences during the non-breeding season. It is also not suspected that abnormal rainfall had an influence on the occurrence of Whitebellied Sunbirds in these areas. Rainfall over the areas in question was close to normal during the past three seasons (rainfall data, Meteorological Services, Windhoek).

Seasonal movements of Whitebellied Sunbirds in the region are described as taking place along an east-west axis or north-south axis, from more arid western regions in summer to moister more eastern and northern parts of the range in winter (ASAB2). In contrast, at least part of the Whitebellied Sunbird population in Namibia moves in the opposite direction during the dry season, to areas even further to the west and to the south. Although only witnessed during the winters of 2002 and 2003, it is thought to be a normal occurrence as the prime sources of nectar, *F.*

*albida* and mistletoe species, flower regularly in winter and throughout the year respectively. *F. albida* flowers irrespective of local rainfall, as it is dependent on groundwater in the ephemeral rivers. It provides a reliable food source in otherwise arid western Namibia.

### Conclusions

In addition to being resident and/or nomadic in the north and northeast (ASAB2), at least part of the Whitebellied Sunbird population in Namibia moves substantial distances during the winter non-breeding season. They migrate deep into the Nama Karoo and Namib Desert biomes in the west, mainly along ephemeral-river courses, and reach 24°S in Kalahari shrubland in the central area. These movements probably take place regularly, unaffected by annual rainfall.

### Acknowledgements

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## Gleaning of cattle by Red-winged Starling and White-necked Raven in the former Transkei

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Aside from Red-billed and Yellow-billed oxpeckers, Dean and MacDonald (1981) recorded 18 species of African birds that have been observed actively gleaning mammal species for ectoparasites. Gleaning, as reported by these two authors, can be divided into three types that are, to some extent, governed by the habitat in which the gleaning occurs. The first is that common to the oxpeckers where the bird perches on the mammal while gleaning. This occurs mostly in savannah, montane areas or grassland. The second involves hovering, hopping or standing next to the animal in order to access ectoparasites. This is most common in wooded or forested habitats with abundant perches. The third, in

*She plucked several ectoparasites from the neck and shoulder region of the cow and fed them to the youngster*

aquatic habitats, involves diving or swimming alongside the animal. Since the publication of this review, several new bird-mammal associations (e.g., Vernon & Dean 1988; Anderson 1992; Taylor & Skinner 2001; Roche 2004), and more specifically those involving gleaning of ectoparasites, have been recorded. Dean and MacDonald's 18 species comprise the Little Grebe, Crested Guineafowl, Black Crake, African Jacana, Common Sandpiper, Cape Wagtail, Yellow-bellied Greenbul, Chorister Robin-Chat, Cape Glossy Starling, Pied Starling, Red-winged Starling, Pale-winged Starling, Common Myna, Fork-tailed Drongo, Pied Crow, Cape Crow, White-necked Raven and East African Piapiac. To these can be added Familiar Chat (Steyn & Hosking 1988), Terrestrial Brownbul (Currie 1999) and Eastern Nicator (Roche & Kilpin 2003). While this article does not offer evidence of new species in-

volved in this behaviour, it provides interesting additional observations.

Although competition between the aforementioned species and oxpeckers has not been observed, let alone quantified, it is likely that gleaning behaviour by other species is more common in areas or habitats where oxpeckers occur either in low densities or are absent (Tilson 1977; Fennessy 2003). The former Transkei region of South Africa is such an area and currently contains neither oxpecker species. Indeed, the Eastern Cape province (of which the Transkei now forms the northeastern part), except for recent introductions of Red-billed Oxpeckers into a handful of areas around Grahamstown and Queenstown, is devoid of oxpeckers.

Despite the remote and poverty stricken nature of the area, dipping of cattle does occur. It could not be established what kind of dip is used, nor if all cattle are consistently dipped (Glynne Bodley pers. comm.). It is clear that at least some cattle carry a tick load that makes them attractive sources of food.

Two observations were made on the Transkei coast north of the Mbotyi River mouth, during late December 2003. In the first, a female Red-winged Starling *Onychognathus morio* perched on the back of a cow lying on the beach and was closely followed by her fledgling. She plucked several ectoparasites from the neck and shoulder region of the cow and fed them to the youngster who demonstrated its inexperience by losing its balance and literally skiing down the flank of the animal. Two days later, in much the same area, a group of four White-necked Ravens *Corvus albicollis* landed on the

beach next to a herd of cattle lying in the sand. One of the birds approached a bull and twice plucked ectoparasites from the neck, with no reaction from the larger animal, before flying off. Approximately a kilometre inland, two Cape Crows *Corvus capensis* were seen perched on individual sheep in a flock grazing in grassland. No gleaning was seen however and it is perhaps more likely that they were using the sheep as mobile perches while taking advantage of flushed insects, such as grasshoppers.

Both Redwinged Starlings and White-necked Ravens have previously been recorded gleaning ectoparasites from cattle. Red-winged Starlings have been recorded gleaning Impala, Klipspringer, donkeys, goats, cattle (Dean & MacDonald 1981), Eland, Cape Mountain Zebra (Fry et al. 2000) and Bushbuck (Mortimer & Roche 2002). White-necked Ravens have been recorded gleaning Warthog, Cape Buffalo and horses (Dean & MacDonald 1981).

Of interest in my sightings is, in the first case, the 'teaching' of the habit to a fledgling, and in the second, the fact that ectoparasites were plucked from a standing position next to an animal in repose, a technique that has been recorded in Pied Crows (Fry et al. 2000), but does not appear to have been previously noted in White-necked Ravens.

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"The time-and-motion study people did a great job, but you find the odd trouble-maker wherever you go."



## Honey Badger shadowed by Dark Chanting Goshawk

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Pale Chanting Goshawks *Melierax canorus* following foraging Honey Badgers *Mellivora capensis*, in the hope of snatching escaping or neglected food items, are well known. It is a behaviour that has been best documented in the Kalahari where the open, sandy habitat undoubtedly favours such practices (Guy 1976; Dean & MacDonald 1981; Steyn 1982). In a recent study on Honey Badgers in the Kgalagadi Transfrontier Park, for example, Keith and Colleen Begg observed as many as six Pale Chanting Goshawks following foraging Honey Badgers. The goshawks benefited from escaping rodents and reptiles exposed by the digging of the badgers. Up to 40% of prey dug up by the badgers apparently escapes, and it is this that attracts the goshawks (see [www.honeybadger.com](http://www.honeybadger.com)). The Pale Chanting Goshawk does not limit itself to following badgers; it has also been recorded following Slender Mongoose *Galerella sanguinea* at Matetsi (Ncube & Phiri 2000) in Etosha (Paxton 1988) and in the Kalahari (pers. obs.).

As one moves east of the Kalahari across South Africa's Limpopo province and into the Kruger National Park, the Pale Chanting Goshawk is replaced by the closely related Dark Chanting Goshawk *Melierax metabates*, a species that prefers more wooded areas in comparison to the arid scrub preferred by the Pale Chanting Goshawk. Honey Badgers also occur here, although they are less conspicuous than those in areas of Kalahari sands, and are typically seen less often.

Early one morning in April 2002, while walking in an area to the north of Ngala Lodge in the central district of the Kruger National Park, I noticed a Dark Chanting Goshawk perched unusually low on a bush for a species that is almost always seen in the canopy. I didn't have binoculars with me and I slowly walked towards the goshawk to determine

what was going on when I noticed a Honey Badger shuffling through relatively long grass. As the badger foraged, the goshawk followed it, flying from bush to bush (mostly *Grewia* sp.) as the badger investigated rodent holes, grass clumps and other likely prey refuges. I followed the unusual pair at 30–40 m for about 10 minutes with the badger being unaware of my presence. No prey items were caught or flushed in this period.

This association appears to have been recorded only twice before, on both occasions in the intensively monitored Sabi Sand Game Reserve (P. Chadwick on [www.honeybadger.com](http://www.honeybadger.com); Ian Thomas pers. comm.), but it is probable that it has been overlooked. The habitat preference of the Dark Chanting Goshawk, combined with the more retiring (and nocturnal?) nature of lowveld Honey Badgers, means that this behaviour is inevitably less common than in the Kalahari, owing to the relatively poor visibility of badgers to the goshawks, and because their respective activity periods do not overlap as much. The above records, as well as one of Dark Chanting Goshawks following Ground Hornbills *Bucorvus leadbeateri* ([www.honeybadger.com](http://www.honeybadger.com)) do, however, point to an instinctive opportunism in the Dark Chanting Goshawk similar to that documented for its paler congener.

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## Ringling for Africa: the Ngulia Migration Project

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Each year, when the moon is waning over East Africa, and the small rains are drawing to an end, a miracle takes place. Thousands of Palearctic warblers and other migrants are grounded on their southward flight, lured in poor weather to the floodlights at Ngulia Lodge's illuminated waterhole. This phenomenon is the subject of an ongoing ringing project that began in 1969.

The birds leave Europe as early as July (Backhurst 1996) in their quest for eternal summer, and head for southern latitudes. En route over Africa, they stop to feed, probably in Ethiopia, and by late October the first birds reach Kenya. During November and December, a stream of Palearctic migrants passes over Kenya, to the east of Mount Kenya and Mount Kilimanjaro (Pearson 1996).

The birds' flyway passes over a private game lodge, Ngulia Safari Lodge, which is perched on a saddle in the Chuyulu Hills. Ngulia Lodge is located within Tsavo West National Park. Tsavo, of *The man-eaters of Tsavo* fame (Patterson 1986), is the largest conservation area in Kenya. At coordinates 03°00'S, 38°13'E, the lodge is not far south of the equator. The building is located at an altitude of 900 m above sea level, and from its eyrie viewpoint, overlooks a vista of the plains of Tsavo to the southeast.

In Kenya, the 'small rains', which are also the most reliable rains, coincide with the main migration period. At Ngulia, on many nights during these rains, a heavy, warm mist rolls in from the seaward side, grounding migrating passerines in huge numbers. The heavy mist disorientates the birds and forces them to land. The floodlights that illuminate the lodge's waterhole act as a lighthouse to the confused birds, especially when the moon is new and the skies are dark. The birds literally rain out of the misty sky, and settle

on the low vegetation and even in the lodge. These birds are nocturnal migrants, using the moon and stars as cues. They rest and feed during the day. Nocturnal migration is an adaptation to increase the time available for feeding by daylight, and to reduce metabolic demands on the bird by flying when it is cool, more humid and the air density is higher (Berthold 2001).

It is interesting that there is segregation of species on migration over Africa. Almost all Marsh Warblers, River Warblers, Thrush Nightingales and Olive-tree Warblers migrate along the narrow southeast Kenyan corridor, with these species only rarely recorded in Uganda, whereas conversely, the majority of Reed, Great Reed and European Sedge warblers migrate over Uganda with only small numbers to the east of the Rift Valley.

Every year a team of international volunteers mans a ringing station at the lodge, capturing 20 000–30 000 birds during the two or three two-week periods around new moon. At night, once the tourists have gone to bed, mist nets are erected 50 m from the open-air dining room. The length of nets in use depends on the numbers of birds present and the number of volunteers available to man the nets. Generally two 12-m nets remain open as long as the mist is down. In the absence of mist, tapes are used to attract the birds down to the area, but numbers caught on clear nights are minimal by comparison. Serious ringing usually gets underway soon after midnight. Ageing of birds according to subtle plumage characteristics is challenging at night, more so as it is done under lamplight with huge numbers of moths, beetles and other nasties (collectively called *dudus* in Swahili) crawling all over one. There is one particularly nasty insect, a staphilinid beetle of the genus *Paederus* (Williams 1993)

which is locally known as a Nairobi Eye. This beetle releases a blistering agent when one accidentally brushes against it. The toxin, pederin, does not sting at the time of release, but within three days causes a deep blistering of the skin that is extremely painful and can become the size of a saucer. The lesion is often linear as a result of the insect being brushed off the skin. The fact that the Nairobi Eye is a miniscule beetle of about 7–10 mm long and 0.5–1 mm wide, makes avoiding them very difficult. And who thought the big and hairies were the creatures to be

*The highest number of birds ever caught on a single day was on 27 November 2000, when 3268 birds were ringed.*

scared of in Africa! Many ringers carry home a healing lesion as a badge of honour on their departure. But the ringing is worth it!

The hotel staff are wonderful in their acceptance of foreigners thrashing around the bush at night in areas that are prohibited for safety reasons to other tourists, for providing a constant stream of albeit weak coffee during the night, for supplying early morning mandazis (a type of doughnut made with coconut milk) to famished ringers, and for sweeping up heaps of dead insects before the tourists arrive for breakfast.

When dawn breaks, a series of 18 nets, totalling about 200 m, are opened, and the dawn chorus is marked by a massive catch of migrants that have spent the night in the immediate vicinity of the lights. A production line ensues, with high-pressure extraction, carrying of bags containing 3–5 birds each on long bamboo poles to the ringing station, which in daylight is moved to the makuti (banana thatch) lapa at the swimming pool area. One scribe handles 3–4 ringers, which requires intense concentration. It is no surprise that even in this ringers' paradise, Sod's Law rules, as it occasionally happens that the bird that gets controlled overseas is the one for which the ring numbers or prefixes were mixed up. Any bird bag containing a special – either a ringed bird or rare species – is marked by a slip of grass or twig tied into the mouth of the bag.

The huge number of birds keeps ringers busy till just before noon, with a system of shifts applying for the eating of breakfast. By the afternoon, most ringers take a nap, but for those who suffer from insomnia due to overtiredness or from knowing no moderation, ringing continues in the form of a few strategically placed nets for catching Afrotropical species. Flick-netting (Wood 2002) of hirundines also continues throughout the day. This method uses a fixed pole at one end and a ringer operating the other end of the net. The net is held parallel with the ground and as

swallows swoop low over the grass to hawk insects, the net is flicked upright to catch them individually. A record number of a thousand swallows has been caught in one day by this method. Needless to say, cold Kenyan *Tusker* beer tastes wonderful at the bar before supper, and then the whole cycle begins again.

On those days when ringing is slow, people catch up on sleep or go on game drives in the reserve. The area is volcanic, with craters and lava flows, and a subterranean water source called Mzima Springs that, until fairly recently, was the sole freshwater source for Mombasa. The view from the stoep of Kilanguni lodge to the west is unequalled if Kilimanjaro is what you want to see.

Table 1 below reflects some of the species caught, with totals for 2003 and totals to date for the whole project since inception (G. Backhurst unpubl. data). The main species caught are Marsh Warbler *Acrocephalus palustris*, Thrush Nightingale *Luscinia luscinia*, Common Whitethroat *Sylvia communis*, River Warbler *Locustella fluviatilis*, Red-backed Shrike *Lanius collurio*, Olive-tree Warbler *Hippolais olivetorum*, Basra Reed Warbler *A. griseldis*, Garden Warbler *Sylvia borin*, and Willow Warbler *Phylloscopus trochilus*. Reed Warbler *A. scirpaceus*, Great Reed Warbler *A. arundinaceus*, Sedge Warbler *A. schoenobaenus*, Barred Warbler *S.*

**Table 1.** Numbers of some Palearctic migrant species caught at Ngulia.

Species	Common name	October–December 2003			Total 1969– 2003
		night	day	total	
<i>Clamator jacobinus</i>	Jacobin Cuckoo		3	3	<b>393</b>
<i>Caprimulgus europaeus</i>	Eurasian Nightjar	28	2	30	<b>724</b>
<i>Hirundo rustica</i>	Barn Swallow	20	478	498	<b>12 753</b>
<i>Delichon urbica</i>	House Martin		53	53	<b>105</b>
<i>Luscinia luscinia</i>	Thrush Nightingale	2 188	2 260	4 448	<b>72 169</b>
<i>Locustella fluviatilis</i>	River Warbler	178	181	369	<b>10 290</b>
<i>Acrocephalus arundinaeaeus</i>	Great Reed Warbler		3	3	<b>113</b>
<i>A. griseldis</i>	Basra Reed Warbler	24	46	70	<b>1 917</b>
<i>A. scipaceus</i>	Eurasian Reed Warbler		10	10	<b>158</b>
<i>A. palustris</i>	Eurasian Marsh Warbler	2 066	4 597	6 663	<b>135 759</b>
<i>Hippolais olivetorum</i>	Olive-tree Warbler	5	117	122	<b>1 452</b>
<i>Sylvia communis</i>	Common Whitethroat	1 351	2 998	4 349	<b>75 198</b>
<i>S. atricapilla</i>	Blackcap	1	2	3	<b>126</b>
<i>P. trochilus</i>	Willow Warbler	200	165	365	<b>4 961</b>
<i>Lanius collurio</i>	Red-backed Shrike	74	244	318	<b>3 731</b>

*nisoria* and Blackcap *S. atricapilla* are some of the less commonly caught birds.

The highest number of birds ever caught on a single day was on 27 November 2000, when 3268 birds were ringed. The highest ringing total for any one year was 29 591 in 1995. The grand total of all birds caught to date is a whopping 342 207. The percentage of controlled and recovered birds runs at 0.05%, with the following a few of the more interesting records:

- ✧ Thrush Nightingale ringed at Vestfold, Norway on 07/08/01, caught and released at Ngulia 21/11/01 – longest movement of any Ngulian recovery or control: 7338 km in 106 days.
- ✧ Eurasian Marsh Warbler ringed at Ngulia on 26/11/75 and killed by boys in Mulanje, Malawi, 5 days and 1480 km later – the fastest movement of any Ngulia bird.
- ✧ Marsh Warbler ringed at Ngulia on 07/12/89 and recovered on 31/12/90 at Gokwe, Zimbabwe – the southernmost recovery.
- ✧ Controls of four Barn Swallow *H. rustica* and a Eurasian Nightjar *Caprimulgus*

*europaeus* ringed at the Chokpak Ornithological Station in Kazakstan, the most easterly recovery site for the Ngulia scheme.

- ✧ Marsh Warbler ringed on 15/11/69 at Pisek, Czech Republic, and controlled at Ngulia on 07/08/79 – the first control at Ngulia (after 10 years!).
- ✧ Barred Warbler ringed on 28/11/72 and recovered at Al-Meznab, Saudi Arabia on 19/09/73 – the first recovery of a Ngulia-ringed bird, after only 36 Barred Warblers had been ringed. To date still the only recovery for this species although 1682 have been ringed.
- ✧ Chestnut Weaver *Ploceus rubiginosus* ringed at Ngulia on 06/12/74 and recovered at Migwani, Kenya, 210 km and 145 days later – the only recovery so far of an Ngulia-ringed Afrotropical bird.
- ✧ Thrush Nightingale ringed 25/11/98 and recovered south of Soge, Ethiopia, on 24/10/99 – the only recovery of a Ngulia-ringed Palearctic species in the Afrotropics north of Ngulia.

Small numbers of birds ringed in previous years are also retrapped at Ngulia, showing fidelity to migration routes.

The ringing project is controlled by a handful of expatriates and locals, but is entirely dependant on man/womanpower provided by a group of foreign volunteers. The atmosphere is very cosmopolitan, somewhat eccentric, but stops short of Bohemian. The multilingual nature of the ringing team makes the use of scientific nomenclature for birding essential. For those people who complain about the 'new' common names adopted by Roberts VII, please realise that they indeed represent progress, as the names we use in South Africa will now be in line with those used in Kenya and elsewhere. Thick-knees and wren-warblers, robin-chats, greenbulls and brownbulls, are all familiar names to those of us who have birded in East Africa. A Barred Warbler in the old South Africa used to be a *Calamonastes fasciolatus*, but a Barred Warbler at Ngulia is a *Sylvia nisoria*, a warbler related to the Garden Warbler, that does not occur as far south as RSA.

Grounded migrants that feed during the daylight hours then move on, so today's birds are almost never retrapped tomorrow. The question is, where are they heading? Although by no means all of the species we regularly catch at Ngulia move as far south as South Africa, indeed many do. There is a theory that similar conditions to Ngulia may exist in Limpopo Province, especially along the Soutpansberg. If one looks at the atlas, reporting rates for Palearctic migrants seem highest in the eastern section of Limpopo Province along the border with Botswana. Will birders out there please keep a sharp lookout for the first Palearctic migrants of the season, and report back to us where and when they are seen. We hope to be able to establish when the first wave of birds arrives. Such data is available and published for Botswana (Herremans 1994.)

We also hope to discover whether a similar weather-dependant phenomenon of grounding occurs at this latitude. We espe-

cially ask observers in the Soutpansberg (and at Waterpoort, Wylie's Poort and in the region of Entabeni) and Blouberg to watch the skies on any misty nights from November onwards. The birds can be seen on the wing before being grounded, passing overhead in a fairly directional way. We are hoping that birds on migration will encounter the barrier of the Soutpansberg and have to overfly this high lying ground, perhaps using natural cuttings in the topography. So on misty nights, put on your floodlights and check the skies, and the bushes the next morning. It would be a huge thrill if we could find an equivalent site for a ringing station in South Africa. We also invite comment from anyone north of our borders who might be aware of similar conditions.

Any ringer who is interested in a ringing experience of a lifetime can contact the author at the address above, or the ringing organiser Graeme Backhurst at graeme@wananchi.com. As ringers pay highly preferential rates at the lodge and reduced park fees, it is not only a wonderful holiday, but an affordable one too. Including airfares, it will cost you less than a ten-day holiday at the sea in a self-catering flat!

### Acknowledgements

We thank Kenya Wildlife Services for allowing ringing to take place within a protected area, and for the concession in visitors' fees for ringers. We also thank the management and staff of Ngulia Lodge, and especially Sarah Tomno, for their tolerance and encouragement. We acknowledge the constant input by Graeme Backhurst, David Pearson and Colin Jackson. Thanks too to all the volunteers, from foreign countries and Kenya, with special mention of the Nairobi Museum staff.

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## The Nest Record Card Scheme (NERCS)

*Marius Wheeler*

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The Nest Record Card Scheme (NERCS) is a long-standing project of BirdLife South Africa and its predecessor, the Southern African Ornithological Society, and has accumulated in excess of 100 000 nest record cards since the 1950s. Very few of these are computerized however, and this poses major difficulties for the analysis of trends, as does the low rate of returns for most species.

The ADU redesigned the nest record card so that appropriate information is gathered and is compatible with computerization. The revised scheme has been operational since 1995 and, to date, 2749 of the new cards have been computerised (Table 1).

**Table 1.** Number of nest record cards received per province (NERCS database).

Province	Cards	%
Western Cape	1148	41.8
Northern Cape	1044	38.0
KwaZulu-Natal	124	4.5
Free State	119	4.3
Mpumalanga	112	4.1
Limpopo	109	4.0
Eastern Cape	44	1.6
Gauteng	37	1.3
North West	12	0.4
<b>Total</b>	<b>2749</b>	<b>100.0</b>

This clearly shows where the gaps are in terms of data collection per province. Currently, 128 people have contributed cards to the revised scheme. It is worth mentioning the top four observers. R. Visagie from the Northern Cape has more than 1000 cards to her name. R. Jeffery, C. Spottiswoode and G. van Zijl, all from the Western Cape, have in excess of 100 cards each. None the less, I would like to thank each and every NERCS participant for providing valuable information. Please keep those cards coming in.

I encourage all birders and conservators to become involved in NERCS. We need more participants!

### Why do we collect nest information?

Apart from the importance of breeding biology to academic ornithology, breeding success is a vital measure of the health of populations. A decline in population numbers can be due either to increased adult mortality or to decreased breeding success, or some combination of the two. It is therefore integral to the ADU's population monitoring objectives to focus on nest records. In addition, nest record cards provide information on breeding season, clutch size, incubation period and nestling period. This information in turn finds its way into the literature where it can be used by all.

### What do we have? What do we need?

Table 2 shows the number of Nest Record Cards received for the top ten birds. Laughing Dove, African Black Oystercatcher and Cape Sparrow are way ahead of the rest! The other seven species indicated here also have a fair number of cards but it can definitely increase. Currently the new revised Nest Record Card Scheme only contains records for 274 species. Ninety of these species only have one Nest Record Card submitted. It is clear that much work needs to be done.

We encourage data collection of all species, but in the case of Red List species we urge special care. It is best not to search for the nests of threatened before one has consulted with conservation authorities and ornithologists to make sure that your activities do not pose any threat to the birds and their breeding success.

### Getting started

Signing up as a participant for the NERCS is easy. If you feel up to the challenge, please make contact with me. I will kit you out with a NERCS starter pack. Alternatively, visit the ADU's website and follow the links under *research*. All the documentation and forms related to the NERCS are available there.

Collecting data for NERCS is relatively challenging as ADU projects go. First, you need to find a nest! Birds employ various techniques to hide themselves and their nests. You need to know the signs to look for; Chapter 3 in the NERCS handbook provides useful information on finding nests. It can be a mental and sometimes even a physical challenge to locate a nest! Luckily, the more you practice the better you get at it. Once you have found a nest, the ideal is to visit it on at least two separate occasions. In this way one obtains quantitative information that can be used to measure breeding success. The ideal is to visit a nest five times: during the egg-laying period, incubation

**Table 2.** Number of cards per species (NERCS database).

Cards	Species
349	Laughing Dove
329	African Black Oystercatcher
227	Cape Sparrow
89	Southern Masked Weaver
68	Little Swift
55	Common Fiscal
47	White-fronted Plover
46	Cape Wagtail
45	Blue Crane
45	Red-winged Starling

period, after hatching, before fledging and after fledging. However, single visits can also yield useful information.

NERCS also includes a procedure for recording nests at heronries and other breeding colonies. The methods for this type of breeding site are different to those for solitary nests. Many bird sanctuaries have colonies and we would like to know more about them.

Again, thanks to all NERCS participants, and keep those cards coming!



"Hi, gorgeous . . . hi, gorgeous . . .  
hi, gorgeous . . ."



Cape Eagle Owl by A. Clarkson from **The atlas of southern African birds**,  
1997, BirdLife South Africa, Johannesburg.

## Introducing the Cape Eagle Owl Project

**Jonathan Pepper & Chris Lotz**

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The Cape Eagle Owl *Bubo capensis* is a widespread but scarce and poorly known species. For example, a recent article in *Bird Numbers* (Swanepoel 2003) highlighted the paucity of information about this elusive owl in Namibia; it is probably more widespread in this country than the all but non-existent records indicate. Even in South Africa where it is recorded regularly, its movements remain mysterious. Rumour has it that, although it returns to the same nest site each winter, it may move elsewhere in summer. It may even move away from its typical mountain habitat onto plains at times (perhaps when not breeding; see Fry et al. 1988).

There are three subspecies of Cape Eagle Owl: *B. c. mackinderi* (the largest) is found from Zimbabwe northward to southern Kenya; *B. c. dilloni* (intermediate in size) occurs in the Ethiopian highlands; and *B. c. capensis* (the smallest) inhabits Namibia, South Africa, Lesotho and probably Swaziland (Steyn 1984; Parker 1994).

### Aims of the Cape Eagle Owl Project

The aims of our project are to atlas in detail the distribution of the type subspecies *B. c. capensis*, to study its movements; interactions with the Spotted Eagle Owl; and to produce a breeding-success model. With this information, we would like to review its current status within South Africa, and suggest appropriate conservation action if necessary. We are fitting in with the aims of the Global Owl Project ([www.globalowlproject.com](http://www.globalowlproject.com)). In particular, we would like to refine survey

techniques for this species, make high quality recordings of its vocalisations, and contribute to the production of a phylogeny of the world's owls. As a by-product of this latter aim, we hope to shed light on how genetically different the three subspecies of Cape Eagle Owl are from one another. The more different they are, the more important the conservation of not just one, but all three, becomes.

### How you can get involved

We are asking you, the birding public, to get involved. You can help us by taking part in our owling weekends, or by sending us observations. Phase I of the project is to locate Cape Eagle Owls all over southern Africa and to get an indication of their density, movements, breeding and any interactions with the Spotted Eagle Owl. Please e-mail us at [capeeagleowlproject@hotmail.com](mailto:capeeagleowlproject@hotmail.com), or write to: Cape Eagle Owl Project, Avian Demography Unit, University of Cape Town, Rondebosch 7701, and we will send you survey forms and identification guides, and add you to our mailing list.

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## Roost counts – adding value to CWAC and wetlands

**Douglas M. Harebottle & Marius Wheeler**

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It's 17:00 on 5 May 2004 and we are looking over the small water-retention dam at Edith Stephens Wetland Park (ESWP), near Phillipi on the Cape Flats. The sun is just about to drop behind Table Mountain. On three Port Jackson-infested islands in the dam are White-breasted Cormorant (30), Reed Cormorant (15), African Sacred Ibis (4), Cattle Egret (22) and Black-crowned Night-Heron (3). We are here specifically to count the number of waterbirds that roost on the islands.

It was during the winter of 2003 that large numbers (up to 1000 birds) of Cattle Egret and Sacred Ibis were counted on the islands during routine monthly CWAC counts at ESWP. Interestingly, these high numbers were not reported during the winter of 2002 when the islands contained active heronries. CWAC counts have been conducted at ESWP since April 2002 and the change in use of the island from a heronry to a roost site has been fascinating. Historically, the dams were used as a roost site (D.H. pers. obs.), but there is no data on the size and composition of the roost. With the roost active again this year, we intend to measure the size of the roost. Morning CWAC counts do not reveal the true picture as many birds begin dispersing by the time the counts are carried out (c. 08:30).

After discussions with staff from the Western Cape Primary Science Programme (PSP), an organisation based at ESWP, it was decided that they would try to arrange for some casual counts to be done in the evening to get estimates of bird numbers at the roost. One of the security guards, Hilaire Kahuka, who is an immigrant from the Democratic Republic of Congo, has an interest in birds and took up the challenge to do the counts. Armed with a pair of loaned binoculars from the PSP, he made nine counts from 3–29

April 2004, six in the evening and three in the early morning, focusing on White-breasted Cormorants, African Sacred Ibises and Cattle Egrets. His counts seemed surprisingly high for some species, and we decided to confirm his findings.

Together with Hilaire, we counted birds from 17:00 until last light at about 18:30. Initially we planned to count birds perched on the trees or sitting on the islands every 30 minutes to track the change in abundance. However, we soon discovered that counting birds as they were flying in provided better estimates because of the disturbance created by birds coming in to roost. Using this method also gave us the opportunity to record the direction from which birds were flying in, providing an indication of the spread of dispersal during the day. The results of our counts and maximum numbers from Hilaire's counts are presented in Table 1.

Surprisingly, our count on 5 May revealed that Hilaire's numbers were under-estimations rather than the over-estimations we had expected. For ibises and egrets, our counts were almost double those of Hilaire's, while the cormorant counts showed about a 40% difference. Hilaire counted the birds while they were perched, which posed difficulties in low light, and he counted for a much shorter period (10–15 min) than we did, therefore numbers of ibises and egrets were easily under-estimated. The similarities in the counts for White-breasted Cormorant can probably be explained by the behaviour of the cormorants. These birds were only seen perching at the tops of the trees which does make them more visible and therefore easier to count. Nevertheless, we applaud Hilaire's efforts as his counts provided a baseline from which the roost at ESWP could be assessed.

**Table 1.** Roost counts carried out at Edith Stephens Wetland Park during April and May 2004.

Species	Max. count (Hilaire)	Count 5 May	Direction of flight	% of southern African population
White-breasted Cormorant	250	335	From S, SW	2.8%
Reed Cormorant	–	127	From S, SW	<0.1%
African Sacred Ibis	595	1012	From S, SW, SE, E	0.40%
Cattle Egret	770	1130	From S, SW, NE, E	0.12%
Hadedda Ibis	–	2	From E	–
African Darter	–	4	Not recorded	–
Black-crowned Night-Heron	–	3	On island	–
<b>Total</b>	<b>1615</b>	<b>2613</b>		

The most significant aspect of the count was the high number of White-breasted Cormorants. Their numbers at the roost represent almost 3% of the estimated population in southern Africa (Wetlands International 2002), and identifies ESWP as an internationally important wetland for this species. Numbers of African Sacred Ibis and Cattle Egret were not that significant on a sub-regional level, but do represent important numbers at a local and provincial level.

Both cormorant species arrived mainly from the south, while the ibis and egrets showed greater variation with some birds coming in from the east and northeast, as well as from the south. Large numbers of White-breasted Cormorants are regularly seen at Strandfontein Sewage Works during the day (D. Gibbs pers. comm.) and this is probably the site from which they leave in the evening to return to ESWP. This suggests that they use the Works strictly as a foraging site, opting to roost elsewhere overnight. The east–west route of the ibises and egrets suggests that at least some of the birds disperse inland and presumably head for the pig farm near Tygerberg Zoo. Up to 300 Sacred Ibises have been counted at the pig farm (see article in this issue), and on the morning of 23 April 2004, large flocks were seen flying in from the southwest to the farm, soon after sunrise (pers. obs.). It would be interesting to determine the proportion of roosting birds

that come from different directions, and to gauge where the birds disperse to. We plan to do this over the coming months.

We documented which species arrived first at the roost and how this influences the eventual make-up of the roost. For the first half hour (i.e., up to 17:30), White-breasted Cormorants dominated with smaller flocks of Cattle Egrets arriving with them. The ibis numbers only seemed to increase from about 17:40, and they were the last of the birds to arrive just before last light. The Cattle Egrets seemed to fly in almost throughout the monitoring period, showing no preference for a specific ‘arrival-time’. The fact that more White-breasted Cormorants were seen initially on the islands, and that they arrive first, suggests that they need to arrive earlier to secure their positions in the tops of the trees, positions that would otherwise be taken by the more numerous ibises and egrets. It was also observed that ibises spend some time drinking and bathing before taking up a roosting position in the trees.

An important outcome from this exercise, and one that we would like to highlight, is the contribution that roost counts can make to CWAC and the conservation status of a wetland. Maximum counts from monthly CWAC counts at ESWP have revealed up to 1490 birds, and include other waterbirds that use the open water and reedbeds (e.g., herons, moorhens, coots, ducks, etc.). Very few

Cattle Egrets and Sacred Ibis feed at the dam, therefore the average maximum total drops to around 300 birds. Comparing this figure with the roost count alone, over eight times more birds use the site than recorded normal CWAC counts, and it becomes clear how much extra value is added to the site's conservation status as a result.

CWAC counts submitted to the ADU are generally carried out during daylight hours, that is, usually after sunrise and before sunset, primarily to maximize visibility. These counts usually characterize the kinds and numbers of birds that use a site for feeding, breeding or perhaps moulting. Notwithstanding the importance of these, the use of a site for roosting is another important component of how waterbirds use wetlands and should therefore be monitored. In the case of ESWP, the size and composition of the roost suddenly elevates the status of the site from relatively insignificant to internationally important. The safety provided by the three islands no doubt contributes to the birds' selection of the dam at ESWP as a favourable night roost,

an aspect that can add enormous conservation value to a site.

We would like to encourage all CWAC-ers and other interested birders to consider conducting roost counts at sites that are known to support large overnight roosts. These counts can be submitted to CWAC using the standard CWAC census forms, and will add important information to the ever-growing database. Such counts add a dimension to bird censuses for wetlands, and may well provide data to elevate the conservation status of sites.

### Acknowledgements

We thank Hilaire Kahuka for doing the initial roost counts at ESWP, and Wayne Jones and Kirsten Louw for assisting with monthly CWAC counts.

**Wetlands International. 2002.** Waterbird population estimates – third edition. Wetlands International Global Series No. 12. Wageningen, The Netherlands.



## Redheaded Queleas in the Eastern Cape

**Graham Winch**

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My first encounter with Redheaded Queleas *Quelea erythrops* in the Eastern Cape occurred in early October 1997 when on a field trip with Carl Vernon, at that time the Ornithologist at East London Museum. On returning from this trip to the west of East London, we opted to use the coastal route past Leaches and Fuller's bays. At Fuller's Bay (3327BB), we noticed a large flock of small birds flying over moribund coastal grassland, 100 m from the sea. The birds' flight was typical of quelea in the air, and they were 'spooky', settling and taking off suddenly for no apparent reason. Binocular views revealed that they were Redheaded Queleas. Many of the birds had partial red cheeks while a few had more advanced breeding plumage. The birds stayed in the area for a week and then disappeared, only to re-appear at Gonubie on the Golf Club fairways, where up to 50 birds were seen. A few days later, small numbers (up to 10 birds) appeared at the bird feeders at my home in Gonubie. These birds turned up daily until the males were in full breeding plumage by the end of the first week of November. At this stage they disappeared from the area (Gonubie 3228CC).

The following year, the RHQs (as I dubbed them) reappeared at my feeders with up to 14 birds, males and females, feeding daily from early July. Attempts to find a roosting site in the area were unsuccessful and there were no further sightings at the Gonubie Golf Club. In July, the male RHQs showed red smudges on their cheeks which progressed to full red heads by early November. At this stage they again disappeared.

This pattern continued every year until May 2002, when I moved house to Settlers Retirement Village, about 4 km northwest of my previous riverside house. The cottage that I rented at the Village was bordered by

a large tract of open *Acacia* grassland, allowing easy access for birds.

Bird feeders were soon established and right on cue, in early July, about 50 RHQs visited daily. This number grew rapidly to c. 300 birds, which cost a fortune to feed. Again the pattern was repeated in early November when the males reached full breeding plumage and both sexes disappeared.

The following year (2003), I purchased a cottage in the same complex overlooking a 50-m wide valley lined with indigenous trees. I moved at the end of May and immediately established feeding stations on the edge of the valley. In order to frustrate the Pintailed Whydah, I spread the feed out on several pieces of slasto about a metre apart.

In early July, the RHQs started to visit in a flock of 150/200 birds, along with Southern Red Bishops, Redcollared Widowbirds and about 100 doves (Laughing, Red-eyed and Spotted Pigeons). Exclusion feeders were purchased which solved the dove problem to a large degree (see note).

As we still had not established a roosting and/or breeding site from visits to most local reedbeds, I sought the help of the local newspaper (Daily Dispatch) and a popular columnist who put out an appeal for information on sightings of RHQs. Unfortunately, only two replies came in, one from Gonubie and one from Sunrise-on-sea, a small coastal community about 5 km north of Gonubie. Both reported small flocks of up to 10 RHQs at their bird feeders.

The exodus commenced as usual in early November, by which time the males were looking very smart with their velvety red heads. The males and females departed together in groups, causing the numbers to dwindle to two males by 14 November, and they had all left by 20 November.

This is now the seventh consecutive year

that RHQs have visited the East London area. Previous records are sparse with sightings recorded at Kei Road and the Transkei. These recent years (1997–2003) have all been wet years for the area, and this may have triggered the influx. Perhaps with the advent of dry years they will revert to being northern KwaZulu-Natal/Mozambique birds. (*During the atlas period, the most southerly records were from just south of 30°S in KwaZulu-Natal. East London is a full three degrees further south. – Ed.*)

Because of their absence here during the months of December to June, I have a hunch that they migrate to our area from the north, fatten up, and then return to nest and breed. There are few recently established breeding sites in KwaZulu-Natal. Do their birds disappear from June to November?

#### Exclusion feeders

The intention of the exclusion-type feeder is to limit the size of birds that have access to seed (or bird food) by means of spaced bars or appropriate size mesh. In my case I use bought feeders made from plastic mesh (35 mm) and pot plant trays with various adaptations of my own.

Exclusion feeders provide the answer to the large numbers of doves encountered in the urban environment. Remember that,

unlike most seedeater species, the dove does not have to de-husk its seeds. Thus every peck is a seed and they can peck like sewing machines! I hang my exclusion feeders in a convenient tree and provide separate food for doves (and any other birds) on pieces of slasto.

With the advent of exclusion feeders, the RHQs were suspicious at first, but the seed soon tempted them into the feeders. Up to 10 birds, RHQs and bishops, piled into each feeder. Not only did these feeders solve the dove problem but also the Pintail Whydah ignored the birds inside the feeders while continuing to chase everything outside. To date, bishops and Redcollared Widowbirds are the largest birds to fit through the mesh. 'My' pintail will not go in, but his wives do.

To prevent any disease spread, I hose the feeders in the evenings to remove faeces and leave them to dry overnight, ready for filling and re-hanging. A chore perhaps, but I believe an essential one.

The highlight was a neighbour who, on seeing the birds in the feeders for the first time, said, 'Shame, why have you caged all these birds? Surely you have too many per cage?' So I took her closer to the feeders whereupon all the birds flew out, to her surprise.



"It's probably too high for them . . ."

## Road counts of crows and raptors in Namaqualand

Stephanie Tyler

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I was interested to see the paper by Harebottle et al. (2003) on road counts of crows and raptors in Namaqualand in October 2003 because a year earlier, in December 2002, I completed counts on three of the same sections starting from Springbok at 08:00. The three sections were the stretches from Springbok to Steinkopf (their route C), Steinkopf to Port Nolloth (D) and Port Nolloth to Alexander Bay (E). Counts were also made the following day on the return journey (starting from Alexander Bay at 12:00) along these same stretches. My results are presented below for a comparison with data collected by Harebottle et al.

Nine species were recorded including Black Crow *Corvus capensis* and Pied Crow *C. albus*. The list was similar to that made by

Harebottle et al., except that I saw no *Gymnogenes Polyboroides typus*, but did see Lanner Falcon *Falco biarmicus*, Black-shouldered Kite *Elanus caeruleus*, Black-breasted Snake Eagle *Circaetus pectoralis* and Jackal Buzzard *Buteo rufofuscus*.

Crows were dominant in December 2002, as in October 2003. Numerous rodents were seen in December 2002, presumably Brandt's Whistling Rat, in vegetation adjacent to the road. The abundance of rats and other rodents presumably contributed to the high numbers of crows and raptors. There was a Black-headed Heron *Ardea melanocephala* feeding in the vegetation, probably on rodents.

Harebottle et al. (2003) found that routes D and E had higher densities of crows and

**Table 1.** Counts of crows and raptors along the roadside on five routes in Namaqualand, September 2002. First column on each route shows numbers seen on the outward journey on 4 December, and the second column for the return journey on 5 December. Figures in parentheses are numbers of birds on nests.

Species	Route C		Route D		Route E		Total	
Pied Crow	4	15	15	29	5	9	24	53
Black Crow	1	0	6	2	0	0	7	2
<b>Subtotal Crows</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>31</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>31</b>	<b>55</b>
Pale Chanting Goshawk	3	2 (1)	8 (2)	5	4	4	15	11
Greater Kestrel	2	14 (6)	29	28 (4)	7	8	38	50
Rock Kestrel			1	0	0	1	1	1
Unidentified Kestrel		1					0	1
Jackal Buzzard	0	2	3	0	4	1	7	3
Lanner Falcon	0	1	2	1	5	4	7	6
Black-shouldered Kite				1			0	1
Black-br. Snake Eagle			1				1	0
<b>Sub-total raptors</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>44</b>	<b>35</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>69</b>	<b>73</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>35</b>	<b>65</b>	<b>66</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>128</b>
<b>Distance (km)</b>	<b>56</b>		<b>96</b>		<b>86</b>		<b>238</b>	

raptors than other routes. Their routes A and B followed the main road south from Springbok. Although I followed routes A and B on 5 December, it was mid-afternoon by then and very hot. Few birds of any species were noted.

In December 2002, there were marked differences between the numbers of some species counted on the outward and return routes. In particular Pied Crows were more numerous on 5 December than on 4 December. Generally, Black Crows were scarce by comparison with Pied Crows.

Of the raptors, Greater Kestrel was most abundant on all routes, while Rock Kestrel was scarce in December 2002. The density of 1 kestrel/4–7 km was very high. Even in the most favoured areas of Botswana there are densities of only 1 kestrel/11 km in Central Kalahari Game Reserve, and 1 kestrel/35 km in the Pitsane grasslands of southeastern Botswana (S.T. in prep.).

In Botswana, there is huge variation in abundance depending on location (Tyler 2002). Pied Crows occurred at the highest densities in more populated areas in the southeast and east, with 15–20 birds/100 km,

but in the towns of Mahalapye and Palapye there were large concentrations. Elsewhere, numbers were generally low. Cape Crow was scarce in the southeast and east (<1 bird/100 km), but more common in the drier Kalahari and in the Pitsane grasslands of extreme southeastern Botswana (2.5–10 birds/100 km). The highest densities were found in the Central Kalahari Game Reserve (17 birds/100 km) and the Kalagadi Transfrontier Park (12 birds/100 km).

Pale Chanting Goshawks occurred at a density of 1 bird/15 km on average. This approaches the high densities found in Botswana in Kalagadi Transfrontier Park and in Central Kalahari Game Reserve where particularly high densities of 1 bird/12 km and 1 bird/10 km, respectively, were found (Tyler in prep.).

**Harebottle D.M., Oschadleus H.D. & Ford M.A. 2003.** Road counts of crows and other raptors in Namaqualand, North Cape. *Bird Numbers* 12(2): 17–20.

**Tyler S.J. 2002.** Crows in Botswana – their distribution and abundance. *Babbler* 41: 23–31.



Secret tools of the common crow

## Publications by members of the ADU December 2003–June 2004

### Books

- Boycott, R. & Parker, V. 2003.** *Birds of the Malolotja Nature Reserve, Swaziland*. Bright Continent Guide 3. Avian Demography Unit & Conservation Trust of Swaziland, Cape Town & Mbabane.
- Crawford R.J.M., Duncombe Rae C.M., Nel D.C. & Cooper J. 2004.** *Influence of climate on seabirds at sub-antarctic Marion Island, Southern Ocean*. XXVII ATCM/1P076. Cape Town.
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- Du Toit M., Underhill L.G. & Crawford R.J.M. 2004.** *African Penguin populations in the Western Cape, 1992–2003*. Avian Demography Unit, Cape Town.
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- Minter L.R., Burger M., Harrison J.A., Braack H.H., Bishop P.J. & Kloeffer D. (eds). 2004.** *Atlas and Red Data book of the frogs of South Africa, Lesotho and Swaziland*. SI/MAB Series no. 9. Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

### Chapters in books

- In:** Minter L.R., Burger M., Harrison J.A., Braack H.H., Bishop P.J. & Kloeffer D. (eds). 2004. *Atlas and Red Data book of the frogs of South Africa, Lesotho and Swaziland*. SI/MAB Series no. 9. Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.:
- Alexander G.J., Harrison J.A., Fairbanks D.H. & Navarro R.A.** Biogeography of the frogs of South Africa, Lesotho and Swaziland. Pp. 31–47.
- Harrison J.A.** *Breviceps acutirostris*, *Breviceps montanus*, *Breviceps rosei*. Pp. 170–171, 183–184, 188–189.
- Harrison J.A. & Minter L.R.** *Breviceps gibbosus*. Pp. 177–180.
- Minter L.R., Harrison J.A., Burger M. & Braack H.H.** Introduction. Pp. 1–10.

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- Cooper J. & Ryan R.G. 2004.** ACAP-funded geo-location loggers recovered from Marion albatrosses after a year at sea. *ACAP News* 4. ([www.acap.aq](http://www.acap.aq)).
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A. At the *Waterbirds around the World* – Global Flyways Conference, Edinburgh, UK, 3–8 April 2004:

- Cooper J.** Migration patterns and conservation of albatrosses and petrels of the Southern Ocean. Abstracts p. 3.
- Griffin J., Whittington P.A., Bartlett P., Crawford R.J.M., Klages N., Randall R.M. & Wolfaardt A.C.** Patterns of movement of African Penguins *Spheniscus demersus* in South Africa and Namibia. Abstracts p. 181. (poster).
- Harebottle D.M. & Underhill L.G.** The Arctic connection: monitoring coastal waders in South Africa – a case study. Abstracts p. 185. (poster).
- Harebottle D.M., Navarro R.A., Underhill L.G. & Waltner M.** Trends in numbers of waders (Charadrii) at Langebaan Lagoon, South Africa, 1975–2004. Abstracts p. 184. (poster)
- Harrison, J.A.** A pilot analysis of recovery data for African-Eurasian waterbirds.
- Mukherjee A. & Wilske B.** Importance of wetlands for conservation of bird life in the dry lands of western India. Abstracts p. 239. (poster).
- Mukherjee A., Wilske B. & Borad C.K.** Important Bird Area: Western India. Abstracts p. 240. (poster).
- Oschadleus H.D.** Waterbird migration atlas of southern Africa. Abstracts p. 95.
- Oschadleus H.D.** 55 Years of ringing data – past, present and future activities in SAFRING. Abstracts p. 96.
- Oschadleus H.D. & Brooks M.** Cape Gannet *Morus capensis* movements in Africa. Abstracts p. 250 (poster).

B. Other meetings & conferences:

- Oschadleus H.D.** (presented by M. Anderson). **2004.** Raptor ringing in southern Africa. Raptor CG Workshop, Gariiep Dam, 23 March 2004.
- Mukherjee A., Williams T. & Underhill L.G.** **2004.** Stork stalking at the tail-end of the range: Black Storks in the Western Cape province of South Africa. Fourth International Black Stork Conference, Davod, Hungary, 15–20 April 2004. Abstract. Section 1: 24. (poster).
- Mullers R.H.E., Navarro R.A., Underhill L.G. & Visser G.H.** **2004.** How important is the timing of breeding in Cape Gannets (*Morus capensis*). Seabird Conference, Aberdeen, UK. April.
- Underhill L.G. & Crawford R.J.M.** **2004.** Seabirds as indicators of the health of the Benguela ecosystem. Quantitative Ecosystem Indications for Fisheries Management: International Symposium, Paris, France.

**ADU publications**

- De Villiers M.S., Calf K.M., Dyer B.M., Harebottle D.M., Mecenero S., Oschadleus H.D., Ward V.L., Peter H.-U., Amlacher J., Fache R., Gorschewski A., Heinze E., Jung L., Kahles A., Merbold L., Müller R., Nordt A., Schultz K. & Sternkopf V.** **2003.** The Institute of Ecology (Friedrich-Schiller University, Jena) and the Avian Demography Unit (University of Cape Town) collaborative research project, 20 September–9 October 2003. ADU Research Project no. 53. Avian Demography Unit, Cape Town.
- Harebottle D.M.** **2003.** Coordinated Waterbird Counts (CWAC) Newsletter 22, June 2003.
- Harebottle D.M.** **2003.** Coordinated Waterbird Counts (CWAC) Newsletter 23, December 2003.
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- Parsons N.J. & Underhill L.G.** **2003.** African Black Oystercatchers *Haematopus moquini* at the Koeberg Nuclear Power Station in the 2002/03 breeding season. ADU Research Report 55. Report to Eskom Koeberg Nuclear Power Station.
- Young, D.** **2003.** Coordinated Avifaunal Roadcounts Newsletter 15.
- Ward V.L.** **2003.** Use of anthropogenic structure as a nest site by Cape Siskin *Pseudochloroptila totta*. Bird Numbers 12(2): 38.

- Ward V.L., Oschadleus H.D., Symes C.T. & Brown M. 2004.** Review of ringing and biometry of Forest Canaries *Serinus scotops*. *Afring News* 32: 65–68.
- Wortel N.M.E., Venter A.D. & Underhill L.G. 2003.** African Black Oystercatchers *Haematopus moquini* at Dyer Island, Western Cape, South Africa: Population trends, 1997–2003, and breeding productivity, summer 2002/03. ADU Research Report 56. Report to Western Cape Nature Conservation Board.

#### **Works of a popular nature**

- Burger M. & Harrison J.A. 2004.** Southern African Frog Atlas Project completed! *Froglog* 62: 1–2.
- Cooper J. 2004.** Are the mice killing the albatrosses of Gough? *Africa – Birds & Birding* 9(1): 46–50.
- Griffin J. 2004.** Robben Islands feral cats – victims or villains? *Animal Talk*. January.
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- Oschadleus D. 2004.** Cape Weaver roadside colonies in the SW Cape. *Promerops* 257: 18.
- Underhill L.G. 2004.** How long does it take to fly from Robben Island to the Waterfront? *Indaba Inyoni: Newsletter of BirdLife South Africa* 7(2): 26–27.

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### **Donations and membership**

The Avian Demography Unit is still battling to keep on the financial straight and narrow. If your birding has been enriched by participation in the projects of the ADU, please consider making a donation. Apart from accommodation and computing facilities provided by the University of Cape Town, all expenses, including salaries, need to be covered by sponsorships, donations and contracts. Donation cheques should be made payable to the University of Cape Town (not the ADU), and posted to the ADU, University of Cape Town, Rondebosch 7701. The University issues a tax certificate in terms of Section 18A of the Tax Act; donations are deductible.

The ADU does not have any formal membership. Anyone wanting to participate in an ADU project is welcome to do so and will receive *Bird Numbers* free of charge. Although it is not required, we would like to encourage you to join BirdLife South Africa if you are not already a member. BirdLife South Africa is an important sponsor of the ADU and a collaborative partner in its work. (The address is: PO Box 515, Randburg 2125, e-mail: [info@birdlife.org.za](mailto:info@birdlife.org.za).)

Anyone who is not an active participant in ADU projects, but would like to be on the *Bird Numbers* mailing list, should send R30 per annum to cover printing and postage.

## Chirps from the past

*This passage is from the charming **Warriors, warthogs and wisdom** by Lyall Watson, about his childhood in Africa. (1997, Larousse, London). The artist was Keith West.*

One day [. . .] Jabula and I came back with a stork we had found lying out in the bush. It was a fully grown saddlebill stork, a beautiful bird with a bright red beak, like the ones we sometimes saw flying high overhead. But this one was grounded. It was clearly not well and wasn't flying anywhere at all. It couldn't even stand on its own feet without falling over. Ouma looked at its dark eyes and felt all over the great bird's body, which was longer by far than her own. "There's nothing broken," she decided. "Maybe it was something he ate. I'll have to give this matter careful thought."

Jabula was pessimistic, remembering a cow that had died the day after developing the same problem. But Ouma was more hopeful and soon came to one of her remarkable conclusions.

She got up suddenly, went indoors and came out with an old pair of my grandfather's trousers.

"These will do the trick," she announced and instructed Jabula and me on how to hold the stork while she guided the bird's long dangling legs into the trousers. We had to cut the seat of the pants out to make room for the stork's tail, but otherwise it was a perfect fit and looked surprisingly good.

"There is something very appealing," said Ouma, "about a stork in pinstripe trousers."

It wasn't clear to me yet why we were paying so much attention to the bird's appearance.

But I was relying on Ouma's ingenuity, and of course she didn't let me down. After running a clothes line through the belt loops on either side of the trousers, she showed us how to fasten the rope ends to two shady trees in the garden so that the stork was suspended between them, with its feet just touching the ground.

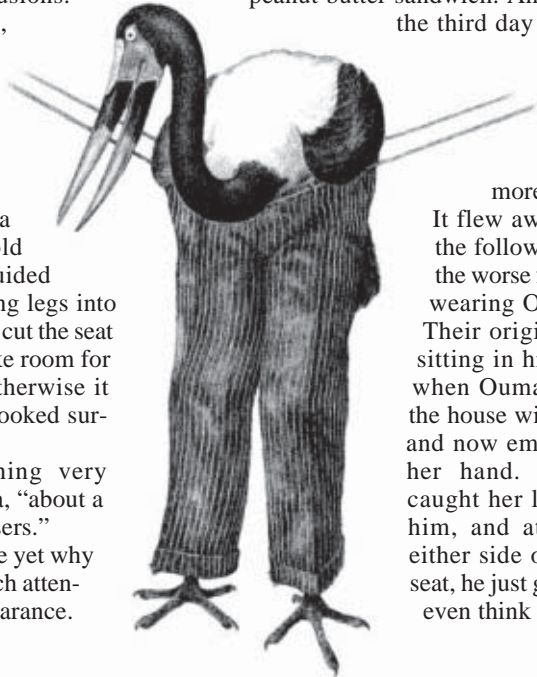
The best-dressed bird in the world perked up immediately.

"There's nothing like new clothes, said Ouma, "to make one feel better."

And it seemed to work. From the moment we stepped back to give the stork room to move, the elegant bird began, for the first time, to look round with some interest. By that evening, it was drinking water from a bucket. The next day it ate three frogs and a peanut butter sandwich. And by the end of

the third day in fancy dress, our stork was flapping its big black wings and looking far more as it should.

It flew away to the north the following week, none the worse for wear, nor for wearing Oupa's trousers. Their original owner was sitting in his special chair when Ouma came back to the house with the modified and now empty garment in her hand. But when he caught her looking hard at him, and at the posts on either side of his verandah seat, he just growled: "Don't even think about it!"



## Birds in Culture

### Chicken

Few bird couples are as different from each other as the hen and her mate, the proud cock. He struts through the barnyard as lord of the roost. He regally sounds his clarion at dawn to awaken everyone. In contrast to the rooster's majestic bearing, the earthy hen hustles through the yard followed by a brood of peeping chicks. Sitting on a nest or busily scratching for insects and seeds, she is the image of domestic toil.

From earliest times, many cultures have associated the cock with the sun. Not only does he announce the start of day, but his gleaming red crest appears to be a reflection of the sun's intense brightness. The ancient Greeks and Romans thus identified the cock with many of their solar gods. The Japanese believed that the cock's singing lured their sun goddess out from hiding. Even today roosters parade in front of Japan's great Shinto temples to remind people of this remarkable feat. In China when a man died, a cock was placed on top of his coffin as a symbol of his voyage beyond the sun.

For the Christians, however, the cock is a bird of augury, associated with Saint Peter's denial of Christ when, in warning, the cock crowed three times at dawn. According to another popular belief, the cock is the symbol of resurrection. It is said that one of the soldiers guarding Christ's tomb loudly denied that Christ would rise from the grave, declaring it was as unlikely as "the cock rising out of a boiling pot". No sooner

had he uttered these words than the cock sprang from the pot. Metal and wooden roosters have since been placed on church steeples as a symbol of the resurrection.

As early as 1500 BC, in India, roosters were trained to fight each other for sport. Down to this day, in several countries, many enjoy cockfighting despite laws against this cruel practice. So common was this spectacle during the eighteenth century that satirist William Hogarth portrayed cockfighting in engravings and included cockshying (throwing rocks at roosters) as one of *The Four Stages of Cruelty*.

Unlike her spouse, the hen has always had a more mundane image. She represents maternity, fertility, and domesticity. If a hen cackles loudly, many believe this means the owner's wife has too much authority, whence the common expression henpecked husband. When a red hen crows, some interpret this as a sign of fire; when a black hen crows, this is thought to indicate a theft. A white hen is seen as good luck. Perhaps the hen's greatest renown comes from her place in children's literature, especially as the wise red hen who planted, raised, and harvested the wheat in order to make bread while the cat, pig, and duck sat lazily by.



From: *The illustrated bird* (edited by M. Oster, Tree Communications, New York, 1978.)