



Percy FitzPatrick Institute of African Ornithology



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APNR Ground-Hornbill Project January 2013

Breeding season 2012/2013

A total of six groups have bred this season in the APNR with lay dates stretching between October 30th and November 14th. Five of these attempts were in artificial nests and one in a natural nest. Karan's Camp was keeping up tradition as being one of the earlier groups to lay eggs, followed by Copenhagen, Janovsky, Strydom, Rhino Road and Naylor groups. Copenhagen once again chose Hull nest in which to lay, and Strydom group selecting Yankee Dam nest this season.

Strydom and Rhino Road produced single-egg clutches with Rhino Road having surprisingly very little lining in the nest. Naylor's second egg was assumed predated during incubation phase. Copenhagen, Janovsky and Karan Khaya groups successfully hatched two chicks each, allowing us to harvest all three second-hatch chicks. The chicks were flown to the participating hand-rearing facilities and are making steady progress.

The six wild chicks will be ringed and measured mid-February before they fledge. I welcome anyone who wishes to join us to do so and I shall make contact in advance for arrangements to be made.

I am happy to report all nine chicks that fledged last season are surviving well and are all still with their groups.



Left: Karan Khaya chicks in nest. The second chick is barely visible next to its much larger sibling.
Right: Karan Khaya chick beginning its journey to the hand-rearing facility. Photos: Kate Meares.

'Bataleur' nest update

The artificial nest donated to Makalali Game Reserve to replace the destroyed natural nest has been inspected rather thoroughly by the Ground hornbill group there. With a few holes being bashed on the sides by the pair, it appears this nest is not quite up to their standards! The group did not attempt to breed this season but lined the remnants of their old natural nest cavity with leaf material. A second attempt to help this group will be made by Makalali Reserve to fix the natural nest as well as erecting another artificial nest elsewhere on the reserve.

Cable Drum nest boxes

Project assistant Barry Visser has been experimenting with a new source for artificial nest boxes: cable drums. Cable drums are frequently discarded once the laying of electrical cables has been completed. These drums are sometimes used to make tables, circular book shelves or stripped for firewood. But once a suitable-sized hole is made through the planks on the side, it becomes an ideal nest box. Cable contractors are all too willing to allow us to remove these heavy structures off their site for them. The wood is good quality and the steel rods hold the structure securely. It requires very little fine tuning. The large size is big enough for a Southern Ground-Hornbill nest and



Large cable drum transformed into a suitably-sized Ground-Hornbill nest. Using Dorothy for scale.
Photo: Barry Visser

after making some careful adjustments to make them safe for nesting purposes we will be testing these out this year to see if they are viable long-term.

Ntsiri nest back in place



Ntsiri nest came crashing down after a windy spell late last year. Fortunately it was before the breeding season was underway so the nest could be repaired and replaced within a few days. The roof and base were repaired using wood donated to us from Tulela camp and the nest was returned to its original position. Thank you to Bruce McDonald for the wood and thank you also to Mark Griffiths who helped with the final tugging to get the nest in place. The group though have shown no sign of breeding this year.

Ntsiri nest once again in its original position. Photo: Kate Meares

Looking ahead

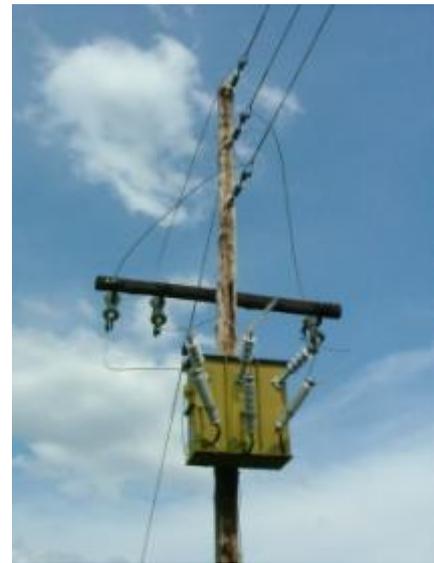
Blood samples

The Molecular Genetics Research Department at the National Zoological Gardens in Pretoria are collaborating with us to process blood and tissue samples from nestling and adult birds taken since 2006. With a total of 48 samples we hope to gain valuable insight into sex ratios, relatedness and genetic diversity levels within and between APNR groups, as well as to publish these results for public access.

Transformer boxes

We are undertaking an initial assessment of transformer boxes within the APNR to determine which of these require insulation by Eskom in order to prevent electrocution of any large perching birds.

Electrocution of large birds takes place when the bird comes into vicinity of an un-insulated conductor cable near the 'perch'. The electric current arcs resulting in a fatal electric shock to the bird. This usually takes place when the bird's wings are extended during take-off or whilst coming down to land. Electrocution of raptors and large birds of prey go mostly unnoticed since the victims are soon scavenged on the ground leaving no trace of the bird. Two Southern Ground-Hornbills recently fell victim to electrocution on Mabula Private Game Reserve, and fortunately they were carrying transmitters on their tail feathers and could thus be located and cause of death identified. These incidents highlighted once again the threat transformer boxes pose to large birds of prey, and consequently Eskom has been involved with insulating boxes in several private game reserves containing Southern Ground-Hornbills.



When the locations of transformer boxes have been mapped we will then take the required steps to allow the process to take place as efficiently as possible.

Phil Hockey



It is with great sadness that I share this news with the APNR community. As some of you may have known, Prof. Phil Hockey, Director of the Percy FitzPatrick Institute of African Ornithology and Director of this Project, was diagnosed with cancer in 2011. But despite intensive chemotherapy his health over this last month has taken a severe turn for the worse. I would like to ask that you keep him and his family in your thoughts and prayers.

Acknowledgements

We wish to thank the landowners of the APNR, and wardens Colin Rowles, Jaques Brits, Willem Nortier, Paul White, Craig Ferguson and Mario Cesario, for their continued support and permission to work with the ground hornbill groups on their properties. Special thanks to Timbavati PNR, Klaserie PNR, Tanda Tula Lodge, and Ndlopfu PNR for helping with fuel. Dow Chemicals continues its generous support of the research. Many APNR members and staff have been of great help, both logistically and by reporting ground-hornbill sightings. We thank one and all.

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Dr Rob Little

The Project's director during this time is Dr Rob Little, Manager of the Fitztitute and with a long-standing connection with the Southern Ground-Hornbill Action Group.

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Often while trying to follow up on groups, this is the best visual of a group one gets: birds walking in the distance and at pace away from you toward dense scrub! Photo: Kate Meares