



# Southern Ground-Hornbill Research and Conservation Program Quarterly Report

January 2016



## Breeding season of 2015/2016

Despite the dry conditions persisting through Spring, the breeding season of 2015/2016 got off to a good start. Three nests were active by the end of October. The peak of the egg laying occurred in the first week of November with seven nests becoming active. By January we were surprised to report that 11 groups had attempted, with only 2 failing early in the incubation stage.

Interesting to note this season was the number of 'dud' eggs discovered. In two nests, the first egg had failed to hatch for unknown reasons, resulting in the chance for the second chick to hatch and thrive. In a nest with a single egg, the egg also failed to hatch resulting in a complete breeding attempt failure.

Importantly, two of our newly installed nest boxes were active this season. The groups of Senalala and Hermansburg had their nests replaced last winter, and they initiated nesting early this season. The new nest box installed on Jejane remains inactive.



Figure 1. Senalala and Hermansburg chicks progressing well.

## A visitor from Cleveland Nature Reserve

For the first time in the Project's history we can report on the immigration of an individual into the APNR study site. The male was ringed in the nest on Cleveland by EWT, some 24 km from where it was sighted and photographed in Grietjie Private Nature Reserve on the 30<sup>th</sup> of August 2015.

## A new natural nest discovered In Timbavati

A new natural nest was discovered on Lillydale farm in the Kempiana block, very close to the western cutline with Avoca. The nest was discovered by chance while driving past and noticing what appeared to be a cavity inside a limb of the tree. Inspection revealed a good-sized cavity, quite deep, with what appeared to be old lining from the previous season. The nest was found to be active in early January.



Figure 2. Lillydale natural nest with it's contents.

## Wild-released birds

The four harvested chicks that were released last year on Thaba Tholo and Loskop Dam Nature Reserve are doing well and continue to be monitored from a distance by trained personnel. We hope that these two release groups continue to thrive in their new environments.



Figure 3. RhinoRoad2014 and Hermansburg2010 together with a female from the wild release program out on Thaba Tholo.

## Looking ahead

Being such a unique cooperative breeder, this species has huge potential for behavioural studies and as such, Dr Rita Covas, Research Associate at the Fitz, will be starting a new phase on behavioural ecology research using the APNR groups. The work would imply continuing the breeding monitoring and foraging habits of the groups, but we would increase the effort of individual identification and behavioural data collection, to determine parameters like investment in cooperative behaviour and associations between individuals.

The ongoing monitoring of nests and nesting attempts is vital to investigate long term trends in the face of global climate change. For this reason the Mabula Ground-Hornbill Project will be assisting us with seasonal nest check work during the breeding season to continue this vital work. The maintenance of baseline monitoring also reserves the research potential of the site to allow for any novel research projects to have a solid and continuous basis of nest productivity and survival. In addition the potential to harvest chicks for the reintroduction programme remains viable. The MGHP has a registered research project in the Sabi Sands, monitors outside of formal protected areas within the Lowveld and now has an MOU with Mpumalanga Parks and Tourism Agency which will then include the Manyaleti. The APNR will thus fall within a greater research context. The MGHP has sustainable funding to this end.

Prof. Peter Ryan, director of the Percy FitzPatrick Institute of African Ornithology, will be giving a presentation on the Ground-Hornbill Project's future research plans on Tuesday 8 March at 4 pm. Please RSVP to me at this email address: [nghututu@gmail.com](mailto:nghututu@gmail.com) if you would like to attend.

## The 'groot trek' south

As my PhD deadline looms, I shall be making the big trek south to finish writing up my thesis at the University of Cape Town as of March this year. As my time in the field draws to a close, I wish to thank all wardens, landowners and members of staff within the APNR for their support and keen interest in the progress of the Project while I have been here. I especially would like to thank the wardens of the reserves, Colin, Jacques, Mark, Craig and Glen, who's involvement allowed for the ongoing success of this Project. Cassie will also be departing the APNR in March to begin his new role as research manager with the Cape Parrot Project based in Hogsback; a new area we are both very keen to explore! As mentioned above, nest checks will continue in our absence to ensure the long-term monitoring of nests and nesting attempts persists. We wish everyone a safe and prosperous 2016.

## Acknowledgements

We thank the landowners and wardens of the APNR 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. Save The Elephant researchers, thank you for your sightings of SGHs in the APNR, they are always appreciated. 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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