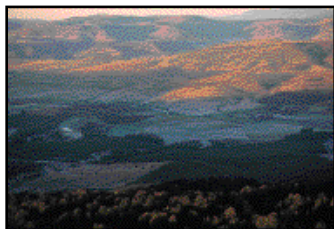


Cape Parrot Big Birding Day 2000

by DR COLLEEN DOWNS

The Cape Parrot *Poicephalus robustus* is South Africa's only endemic parrot and it is regarded as endangered as there are likely less than 500 in the wild. Several factors have caused the rapid decline of the species. These include forest degradation, food and nest-site shortages, little recruitment, removal of birds from the wild for the caged bird trade, and disease (the beak and feather virus). Although restricted to afro-montane forest patches in the Eastern Cape



(from Fort Beaufort) north to southern KwaZulu-Natal (Karkloof), the birds are highly mobile moving between yellowwood forest patches, visiting orchards and occasionally forest near the coast (Mboyiti to Port St. Johns). Flock size varies; singletons, pairs or groups of 5-6 birds are usually observed. However, at localised food sites flock size may increase to 20-70 birds caused by aggregation and giving a false impression of abundance.

Accurate estimates of population size are difficult as standard bird census techniques are inappropriate because the birds are not predictable in their occurrence at particular forests. Consequently, a Cape Parrot Big Birding day was initiated 4 years ago and is held annually. This requires the involvement of volunteer observers including birders, landowners, farmers, students and other interested people. The forests, where Cape Parrots have been observed in the past ten years, are monitored from dispersed observation points. In addition, local orchards where birds occasionally visit are monitored. Time of day, numbers of birds seen, and their movements are recorded. When analysed the results are scrutinised to avoid any repeated counting of the same birds. Other birds and mammal species observed are also recorded.

This year it was decided to split the observations over the afternoon of one day and the morning of the following to facilitate maximum involvement of volunteer observers.

Compared with the dismal weather of 1999, most areas experienced excellent weather this year except for an afternoon thunder storm in the Stutterheim area.

The Cape Parrot population numbers observed during the 1998 to 2000 censuses are shown in Table 1

Table 1: Numbers of Cape Parrots counted on the Cape Parrot Big Birding Day 1998-2000.

Year	AM Total	PM Total
1998	348	179
1999	282	237
2000	395*	396*

*provisional as there are a few outstanding data sheets, however it is expected that numbers will not increase by more than 40.

Implications

The 1998-2000 censuses (Table 1) revealed that Cape Parrot population numbers are low compared with the previous estimates made by Skead (1964), who estimated 600 birds in the Eastern Cape, and Boshoff (1989) who estimated as many as 1,000 birds. Currently these are optimistic figures.

During the censuses, most sightings of Cape Parrots were made of birds flying to or from forest patches and roosting sites. Information collected prior and subsequent to the 2000 Cape Parrot Big Birding Day suggest that there are about 70 birds that move into pecan nut orchards. In the Umtata - Port St. about 170 birds. In the Boston-Dar g-le-Balgowan area there are 16-20 birds and in the Karkloof only about 5 remaining. This suggests a total of about 370 Cape Parrots, which is similar to the number counted on the census day.

Cape Parrots form isolated subpopulations in these areas which are then important nuclei for the surviving population. Forest in these areas must be highlighted as focal conservation areas. In particular the Gxalingle Forest in the Creighton-Riverside area, which has many large yellowwoods (*Podocarpus* spp.), needs special attention as 51

birds were observed roosting there, leaving in the morning early and splitting into smaller flocks to visit nearby forest patches.

Observations prior and subsequent to the census day suggest that there was a shortage of food in the forests this summer and autumn as the Cape Parrots aggregated to feed on fruit (usually pecan nuts) outside of forest. Furthermore, the parrots were observed visiting sites where they have not been seen for the past 5 years. It is speculated that the unusually high summer rainfall caused the fruit of the *Podocarpus* spp. to fall, although it usually remains on the trees for extended periods, whereas other preferred fruiting trees of Cape Parrots eg. *Celtis africana* produced little fruit (pers. obs.).

The Cape Parrot Birding Day is an example of a combined conservation effort incorporating birders, landowners, farmers, students and the general public. In particular, the Creighton-Donnybrook community under the leadership of Malcolm Gemmel is exemplary in its efforts. It had observers at all forest patches in the area in radio contact with one another so that not only numbers of Cape Parrots but also directions of the parrots movements were confirmed.

Future Considerations

Little is known about the density, demography, movements and roosting sites of Cape Parrots in the Eastern Cape- KwaZulu-Natal areas, except that their numbers are very

low. The information obtained during the censuses makes a valuable contribution to knowledge. It is hoped, that as in previous years, participants will volunteer for the 2001 Cape Parrot Big Birding Day to be held on the afternoon of Saturday 12 May and the morning of Sunday 13 May.

Acknowledgements

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South African Cape Parrot (Male)

Photo: Rosemary Low