

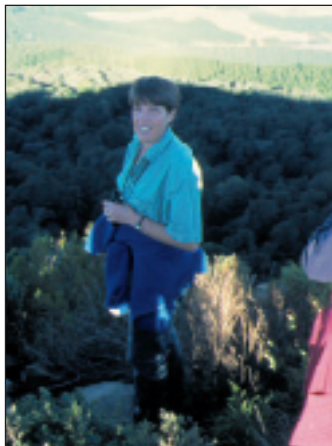
Cape Parrots and Yellowwood Trees

By MIKE PERRIN PhD

Major threats to the Cape Parrot (*Poicephalus robustus*) include the loss of their forest habitat, which supplies their food, particularly the kernels of yellowwood fruits, and nest sites. Nest sites are located predominantly in dead and decaying yellowwood trees, which are lost during storms and to chain saws. Older trees are felled under permit as foresters believe they have reached maximal harvestable yield and will add little to the productivity of the forest, or its regeneration, although the latter is prevented by cattle and goats grazing on yellowwood seedlings from the under storey. Forest patches that remain today are fragmented and widely dispersed causing the parrots to fly long distances between roosting and feeding localities. During seasons when the natural food supply is low or fails, owing to aberrant weather conditions, the parrots may feed in nut or fruit orchards, where they are exposed to shot guns and trapping.

Birds are trapped for aviculture, not usually for pets, yet the demand has increased dramatically. Why? Since the parrots are increasingly rare, the law of supply and demand dictates that the price goes up. Therefore, it is a greater temptation for rural Africans to be persuaded by avaricious middle men to catch wild birds and to raid nests for chicks. Why are these poachers not apprehended? Is it because of inadequate legislation? No, it is because of inadequate law enforcement. Are the law enforcers sufficiently motivated? Yes, some of them are very motivated, but many aviculturists and few veterinarians will not stand up in court to give evidence against the poachers. Occasionally evidence has gone missing from the offices of nature conservation organisations, which has prevented court action.

In order to make future prosecutions successful, advanced contemporary, molecular techniques are being employed. In much the same way that DNA can be used to sex parrots, it can be used to determine parentage, kinship and individual identity. No longer can breeders with a pair of Cape Parrots, acquired many years ago on a permit, be able to replace them with wild-caught birds, when the original pair is sold; or, claim that chicks taken from a nest in the wild are the offspring of an unproductive pair of captive birds. DNA profiles, or fingerprints, will demonstrate this is not so.



Dr. Colleen Downs overlooking an endangered yellowwood forest.

Forensic Science

In June, I travelled to the UK to meet with Dr. Jon Wetton, Senior Forensic Scientist - DNA Research of The Forensic Scientific Service, who does much contract work for the British Police Force and Home Office. He is one of the experts in the labs that developed these techniques. I also met with Dr. Deborah Pain, Head of International Research, and Dr. Guy Shorrock, of the Law Enforcement Section, at the RSPB (Royal Society for the Protection of Birds), who collaborated in bringing successful court actions against several traders of Peregrine Falcons in the UK. I was told that all of the court action by this team in this regard has been successful. I recently appointed Dr. Tee Taylor, who completed her doctorate on the development of microsatellite DNA markers for parrots, to my team at the Research Centre for African Parrot Conservation, at the University of Natal. She will train several masters students in similar techniques, particularly RAPDs (random-amplified polymorphic DNA) and applications. (The students will be jointly supervised by Genetics Professor, Annabel Fossey, and myself to conduct the research work on the individual identity and paternity of the Cape Parrot, which will be used as forensic evidence in court cases. The method will also be used on cranes in conjunction with the Crane Foundation, thereby optimising the use of a new R1.5million, DNA automated-sequencer). A consultant in environmental law is also being appointed to ensure effective use of this information and that provided by informants.

In the past there has been poor co-operation between the nature conservation authorities in the provinces where Cape Parrots occur in the wild and where they are traded. This loophole has been plugged through the activities of the Cape Parrot Working Group which includes representation at senior level by nature conservators concerned with law enforcement.

Expensive operation

This will be a large, ongoing and expensive operation, like that

against global terrorism, but funds are being raised in various quarters by many dedicated individuals, several locally and some overseas. Including for example Jean Pattison, President of the (American) African Parrot Society and Council Member of the American Federation of Aviculture to whom I presented talks at their national congress in Houston in July 2001. The Director of Birdlife SA, Dr. Aldo Berruti, has pledged the full support of his organisation. He, like many others, has accepted not only the regional Endangered status of Cape Parrot, but its probable Globally Endangered Species status. This would almost certainly follow acceptance of CITES Appendix 1 categorisation. The motivation for this has been accepted by KZN Wildlife and been taken to the national committee for approval and submission to the international body. This would immediately place the Cape Parrot at a more endangered level than, for example, any of the African cranes. (Each of our cranes is represented in the wild by an estimated 10,000 individuals plus, whereas the estimate for wild Cape Parrots is about 500!).

Catapult threat

Last year, when I heard that Cape Parrots in the Eastern Cape were infected with psittacine beak and feather disease, which is untreatable and very infectious, I thought that was the last straw for the Cape Parrot, and it might well be. However, there is now yet another threat, Cape Parrots are now shot with catapults, suffer a painful death and are offered for sale in Muthi markets. As far as I know this is not part of traditional medicine or African culture, but abuse by impostor sangomas who are trying to make a few Rands quickly.

Myles Mander of the Institute of Natural Resources advises me that these kinds of occurrences are opportunistic, with only a few species being regularly sought after, which, until recently included the louries, vultures and ground hornbills. Clearly, the poachers and impostor sangomas do not know the true value of the birds for conservation, or financially. I am trying to ascertain why Cape Parrots



Cape Parrot chicks are illegally removed from nests.

can be regarded as muthi. Their bill is robust, which gives them their scientific name (*Poicephalus robustus*), but they are hardly as powerful or as symbolic as rhinos. I wonder whether it is because of its newly acquired financial value and hence their appearance in the muthi trade. It is difficult to place the blame on poor and impoverished rural Africans. This new attack on the ever declining, threatened and endangered species, the Cape Parrot, is catastrophic.

Myles and I will be meeting with the animal traders to discuss and hopefully resolve the problem. For a couple of years he has been asking the birding and wildlife authorities to start working with the traders to address these issues and to look at alternative options e.g. using culled animals or road kills. (An option for the Cape Parrot might be birds that die of natural causes in the captive breeding programme). Dr. Mander says that the people marketing muthi are quite open to discussion and we may get some market support to ban (or control) trading. Every avenue will be explored.

While writing this article, I received a phone call from Dr. Colleen Downs, who has been involved with the Cape Parrot conservation research project from its initiation and who currently runs the annual Cape Parrot Big Birding Day census so effectively, to tell me some more bad news! It transpires that about one hundred mature yellowwood trees have been felled at Ntsinkeni Forest where we have observed Cape Parrots and might have contained nesting sites.

The DWAF (Department of Water Affairs and Forestry) Hans Merensky, controlled forest has apparently been harvested by a freelance timber merchant who was allegedly granted 'permission' by the tribal authority in the region. (How can this sort of action be justified as 'sustainable utilisation' or optimal use of resources? - rather it is financial avarice and yet another rape of the sub-montane forest environment.) Most recent information suggests that the timber has been impounded and legal action is being taken against the timber merchant.

