

Counting Capes

2006 Cape Parrot big birding day

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Despite the bitterly cold weather, observers braved the conditions and assisted with the 9th annual Cape Parrot (*Poicephalus robustus*) count or Cape Parrot Big Birding Day (CPBBD). The Cape Parrot is endangered and their numbers have declined considerably in the past 30 years. This event was initiated to track numbers of birds in the wild over time. The count also increases public awareness and involves the public in conserving South Africa's only endemic parrot. It also highlights the need for protecting their forest habitat. The Cape Parrot's decline is attributed to forest degradation, food and nest-site shortages resulting in poor breeding success, removal of birds from the wild for the avicultural and pet trade, and diseases, especially the beak and feather virus, and predators.

This year 282 volunteers were posted at 103 observation points in three provinces. A total of 1,108 parrots were seen during the afternoon count while 1,322 were seen the following morning. These results are significantly higher than numbers in previous years. Observers saw parrots at 65% and 78% of the localities for the Saturday afternoon and Sunday morning respectively despite the cold and misty weather.

Variability of results between years and discrepancy between the morning and afternoon counts can be a consequence of poor weather, double counting, and simply missing areas where parrots are, on that particular day. Still, over the years there appears to be a positive trend of gradually increasing Cape Parrot numbers, particularly this year. However, we cannot get complacent because of the patchy distribution of the parrots and their dependence on yellowwood forests. The CPBBD should continue, as it is important to monitor trends. Our hope is that the population will continue to increase.

On the negative side, observations may suggest that suitable natural fruit is limited in the indigenous forests. This year parrots were observed feeding at sites away from forests on the CPBBD, often in areas where they have not been previously seen or have been absent for many years. Furthermore, this year parrots fed on exotic pecan nuts before they ripened and visited orchards earlier than previous years. In some areas they have been feeding on the ground

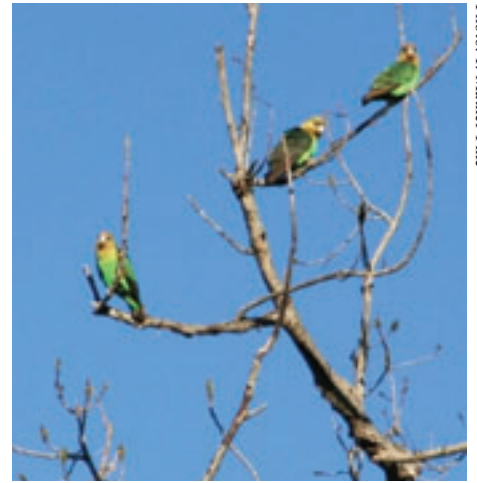


Photo: P. Mather-Pike

While most people only get to see Cape Parrots flying over, these birds were very cooperative during the 2006 CPBBD.

(something they rarely do) on acorns that are high in tannins to discourage animals from eating them. At these non-forest feeding sites the parrots are often congregated in great numbers.

As mentioned in previous reports, one of the problems of covering the range of the Cape Parrots is that some observers do not see parrots at all. However, these nil counts are important too. One group of observers have diligently participated in the count for 9 years and were rewarded with their first sighting of Cape Parrots this year. Historically the parrots were common there according to my grandfather who grew up in the area and who turns 100 years old in September.

Next Cape Parrot big birding day

The 10th CPBBD will be held on the afternoon of Saturday 5th May and the morning of Sunday 6th May, 2007. Please email downs@ukzn.ac.za if you would like to assist.



Photo: Kirsten Wimberger



Bertus Boucher and some of the volunteers from the Umtata area.

Photo: Kirsten Wimberger



Some of the students from the University of KwaZulu-Natal that assisted in the Weza-Ingeli area for CPBBD 2006.