

Final Blows for the Cape Parrot?

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To prevent the extinction of one of South Africa's rarest and most charismatic birds, the Cape Parrot, captive breeding is being undertaken. Aviculturalists, some of whom contribute to the demise of the species, through capture and illegal trade, are making a significant contribution to its survival, through a breeding programme. This is welcome and beneficial. The parrots already decimated in the wild, have recently been subjected to another threat, in the form of parrot beak and feather disease, which has caused the mortality of most of the birds in captivity. This is despite every precaution being taken and at great expense. There is no vaccine to treat infected birds and even diagnosis is a complex biochemical procedure. To ensure a disease free colony for the future, diseased birds are quarantined, and at the last resort euthanised.

A major problem that has also just surfaced is the capture of wild birds by rural people resettled in close proximity to indigenous forests. These impoverished and malnourished local communities are applying for deregulation of the forests to enable some income generation. There are two large flocks of Cape Parrots that nest in the vicinity which are at great risk. Injured birds are now being sold at the road side, but fortunately some have been rescued and treated by a veterinarian. However, they cannot be rehabilitated into the wild, not only because of their injuries but because they are infected with beak and feather disease. They can only be used for breeding if a vaccine is found. Attempts in the USA have been unsuccessful, but there may be a source in Australia.

Previous research on the biology of the Cape Parrot has shown that it is a habitat and diet specialist, dependent on yellowwood forests for its food throughout the year, and for nesting sites during the breeding season. Decades ago these forests were heavily exploited for furniture, as the wood is beautiful and durable, but not replanted, and cattle grazing has prevented natural regeneration. Recent afforestation of upland areas with exotic pines, gums, wattles

and expanding agriculture, have further reduced the extent of natural montane forests. The parrots now fly great distances to find sufficient food and suitable roosting sites, which may well negatively impact on their abundance. The world population of these attractive parrots, which are endemic to South Africa, now approximates 500 birds. Indeed, the effective or breeding population of the birds is significantly less, because many birds are sub-

adult and will not reach breeding age, owing to predation, capture or disease.

During a recent nation wide census of the wild parrots, two birds were seen that were apparently feather plucked, mimicking the symptoms of beak and feather disease. This was cause for concern but not alarm. However, our worst fears have been confirmed in the last few days, eight of eight wild caught parrots have shown to be

positive for the disease. This has potentially drastic consequences for wild and captive birds. Any wild caught birds introduced to existing colonies, of African or other species of parrots, may well spread the infection. This could reduce the trade in wild caught birds, which would be beneficial, but may cause mortality in the wild population, which would be detrimental. It isn't known whether the wild parrots have natural resistance or are particularly sensitive to the disease. This will depend on whether the disease is naturally-occurring or introduced.

One frightening concern is that as the species becomes rarer, it also becomes more valuable to collectors, which increases demand and trade price. This could start a spiral which would be difficult to break. The only solution appears to be a dedicated co-operative recovery programme undertaken by conservators, aviculturalists and ecologists. This is the aim of the KwaZulu-Natal Avicultural Forum, the Cape Parrot Working Group, the World Parrot Trust Africa and the Research Centre for Parrot Conservation at the University of Natal.

The only thing that is certain is that the future of the Cape Parrot is now at greater risk than ever before.



An Appeal for Funds

by ROSEMARY LOW

The Cape Parrot from South Africa is now one of the world's most endangered parrots. As one who has been fortunate to see it in the wild, to listen to its cheerful chortling calls and to watch it in the early morning sun, when the frost was on the ground, I know that it would be a tragedy and a great loss if this charismatic parrot was to become extinct.

A small population has been studied for several years by some very enthusiastic people at the Research Centre for African Parrots who

are gravely concerned about the future of the Cape Parrot. Their work has revealed facts about this species which would aid its conservation and survival. The problem is that they lack the funds to implement the field work which so urgently needs to be carried out.

Now I would like to make an appeal to all our members - and to everyone else who reads PsittaScene - to raise some money on behalf of South Africa's most endangered parrot. Please don't ignore this appeal. If every member wrote out a cheque for only £5 the sum of £10,000 would be raised. If some of the many cage bird or parrot societies in the UK donated a modest sum from, perhaps, a raffle or a bird sale, those funds could be instrumental in helping to save the Cape Parrot.

If you are one of the generous ones who wants to help, please send your donation to the World Parrot Trust in Cornwall (see address on page 19).

Project Proposal:

The Ecology and Status of the Cape Parrot in South Africa

(Part of the Forest Biodiversity Programme and the African Parrot Research Group, School of Botany & Zoology, University of Natal, P/Bag XO1, Scottsville, Pietermaritzburg, 3209)

by Dr COLLEEN T. DOWNS

Introduction

The nominate race of the Cape Parrot, *Poicephalus robustus robustus* has recently been described as a separate species based on size, colour, distribution and habitat preference. It is classed as rare and vulnerable.

Progress

The field work of the initial project has been completed and the presentation of a posthumous thesis by J.O. Wirminghaus is in the final stages. The results include:

- a) Species Status.
Morphological differences of the three races of the Cape Parrot using national and international museum collections of Cape Parrot. It is proposed that *P.r. robustus* be given full species status.
- b) Distributional data of Cape Parrots using South African Bird Atlas Project were mapped, and analysed further for gross movement patterns and densities. Historical evidence shows a contraction of the core range of Cape Parrots.
- c) Importance of yellowwoods, particularly *Podocarpus falcatus* (a forest canopy tree), for breeding, feeding and social interactions of Cape Parrots is evident. Most frequent use of any tree species shows dominance of *Podocarpus* spp. for feeding and as perches. Kernels of *Podocarpus* spp. fruits are preferred and eaten while the exocarp is discarded. Monthly fruit availability of the different forest trees shows that for most species fruiting is unpredictable and that certain species have extended fruiting periods. However, during November - December there is usually a fruit shortage. Movements of

parrots between forest patches shows them to be a food nomadic species based on monthly observations of temporal and spatial activity patterns and feeding observations. Cape Parrots are strictly diurnal though most active during the first and last few hours of daylight. Most feeding also takes place during this time. Between periods of activity the birds mostly remain perched, call, preen, allopreen, rest or occasionally feed.

- d) Drinking sites are important for the parrots, particularly during the dry winter months when very little free water is available.
- e) Breeding success at the two study sites during the past three summers, based on counts of fledged juveniles present was low. Only three nests during the 1993/1994 season and two during the 1995/1996 season were used at the study sites, while one

that had been used previously fell over during strong winds. All nests (n=11), except for one in a live blackwood, have been in holes in dead emergent, dead canopy *Podocarpus* spp. Such dead trees are a scarce resource in the study areas, and thus have important conservation implications.

- f) Population size estimates show that numbers throughout the Cape Parrot range have declined dramatically with large flocks rarely seen. Presently it is tentatively estimated that less than 1000 Cape Parrots in total remain, which is exceedingly low (Downs & Symes 1998).

Proposals

Conservation of Cape Parrots requires conservation of their forest habitats, in particular mature *Podocarpus* sp. The Cape Parrot population decline is caused by habitat loss as forest

area has diminished. It is also exacerbated by selective felling of large yellowwoods for timber that occurred during the last century and the first half of this one. To counter these impacts, corrective measures for the conservation of Cape Parrots are required. These measures include:

- a) Termination of yellowwood timber extraction from Afromontane forests
- b) Provision of additional nesting sites and
- c) Planting of additional preferred food plants.

Long term monitoring of this highly mobile food nomadic species is required together with its food resources, breeding success, population numbers, and the success of the implemented conservation action.

Proposed Research 1999-2005

- 1) Continued monthly monitoring of Cape Parrot populations at Weza and Hlabeni.
- 2) Continuance of the nest box provision project to determine whether nest sites are limiting.
- 3) Availability of snags in Afromontane forest. In particular, determination of abundance of snags, their alteration with time and their potential as nest sites for hole-nesting birds.
- 4) Monitoring of captive breeding programmes and implementation of a studbook for Cape Parrots.
- 5) Liaising and advertising the Cape Parrot Big Birding Day each April, which involves birders, landowners and other interested people.
- 6) Liaison with International Parrot and Bird Conservation Bodies.

References

- Downs, C.T. & Symes, C.T. 1998. Cape Parrots: Report on the second Cape Parrot Big Birding Day, (25 April 1998). *PsittaScene* Vol 10 No 3 pages 5-7.
- Wirminghaus, J.O. In prep. The ecology and status of the Cape Parrot *Poicephalus r. robustus* in South Africa. Posthumous Ph.D thesis, University of Natal, Pietermaritzburg.



Captive female Cape Parrot.