

Cape Parrot Newsletter

Cape Parrot: no doubt a species

CONTENTS

Cape Parrots
in Denmark 2

Drought &
Disease 2

Breeding at
Barkay Birds 3

Cape Parrot
Big Birding 4
day April 2014



CAPE PARROT (*Poicephalus robustus*)

The recent 2015 publication in the journal PLoS ONE “Molecular systematics of the Cape Parrot (*Poicephalus robustus*): implications for taxonomy and conservation” now provides genetic evidence for the Cape Parrot to be viewed as a distinct species. The authors, Riel Coetzer, a PhD student, Prof. C.T. Downs, Prof. M.R. Perrin and Dr. S. Willows-Munro, at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, found

genetic evidence to support that the Cape Parrot should be viewed as a separate species from the two *P. fuscicollis* subspecies, namely the Grey-headed Parrot (*P. f. suahelicus*) and the Brown-necked Parrot (*P. f. fuscicollis*). For several years most of the South African bird book guides have shown the Cape Parrot as a different species based on morphological, ecological and behavioural assessments. However this was not recognized internationally due to lack of any genetic evidence.

Now that there is genetic support it will have implications on the conservation of the species. The criteria for the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species “Vulnerable” status, of which Cape Parrots now qualify, is a total species population size of less than 10 000 mature individuals with no sub populations containing more than 1000. Also, with illegal pet trade being one of the major threats to Cape Parrots, the species can now be listed under CITES Appendix I which will allow for better international trade control. Overall this is great news for the Cape Parrot as now strategies can be implemented to protect and conserve the species with international support.

Cape Parrots in Denmark

The Amazona Endangered Parrot Breeding Facility in Hillcrest bred this pair which, in 2014, was their first export of Cape Parrots to Scandinavia. They are currently owned by a private Danish aviculturist outside Copenhagen. To the delight of their new owner, the birds quickly acclimatised and settled down already showing an interest in their nest. Hopefully they have successfully reproduced during the last European breeding season.



Danish Cape Parrot Pair

Drought & Disease

An important paper was published this year in the Journal of Ornithology “Review of documented beak and feather disease virus cases in wild Cape parrots in South Africa during the last 20 years” by Prof. C.T. Downs, Dr. M. Brown, Dr. L. Hart and Dr. C.T. Symes. Disease, in particular the Beak and Feather Disease Virus (BFDV), is one of the major threats to Cape Parrot populations. BFDV is a common infectious viral disease in wild and captive Psittacines. The disease suppresses the immune system and symptoms include loss, or development of abnormal, feathers, overgrown or abnormal beak, depression, lethargy and severe anaemia resulting in weight loss. Individuals can also be infected yet show no symptoms.

The study assessed samples collected from 1992 to 2014 and found that juvenile Cape Parrots (0-3 years old) were most at risk at showing evidence of infection. Cape Parrots are nomadic feeders so the disease is easily spread among individuals congregating at feeding sites. Importantly 64% of BFDV incidences occurred during years of drought. Food availability decreases during drought resulting in poor body condition which allows symptoms of the disease to be expressed leading to further deterioration in health. Climate change in South Africa shows patterns of decreased rainfall with overall higher minimum and maximum temperatures. This year the country is experiencing the worst drought in 30 years, which has already negatively impacted commercial farming, and the Cape Parrot population may be affected as well.

Breeding at Barkay Birds

Dallas and Donald Kemp at Barkay Birds in Stutterheim acquired two Cape Parrot breeding pairs in February 2014. To their surprise one of the hens had already laid three eggs by the 3rd of June and had started incubating on the 7th. They managed to candle the eggs and realized two were fertile. The first chick hatched on the 10th of July and the second on the 13th. The hen left the nest for the first time on the 14th of July since starting incubation. That morning was bitterly cold in Stutterheim, and possibly due to the hen's inexperience, she let her two chicks get cold and they died. To prevent the cold from being a problem in future breeding attempts, after that breeding season, a new nest box with a reptile heating pad in the base was built and fitted.

On the 15th of August 2015 the younger male from the two pairs seemed a little off. It was not a big concern as it was assumed that he was probably over heating due to the unseasonably hot weather that day. The next morning the bird looked very ill and was removed from the aviary and placed in a brooder box set to 25 degrees. Unfortunately about half an hour later the bird died. On closer inspection it was noted that the bird had suffered a bad laceration to his abdomen. The bird was sent to Dr Peter Wood on the 17th August for an autopsy. He confirmed that the bird had died due to his injury and found the bird in excellent health otherwise. It was an unfortunate loss. Barkay Birds are looking into procurement of another male for that breeding female.

The breeding female from 2014 laid four eggs on 2 September 2015. Once again sat very diligently for 10 days on her eggs with three being fertile. For some unknown reason she abandoned the eggs a few days later and did not return to the nest. The eggs were removed and the pair was going through a courtship period again soon after so hopefully the third time will be lucky for them. The pair is only three years old and bred for the first time at two years eight months so it may take them time to get it right.



One of the successful hatchings from one of the females at Barkay Birds in Stutterheim



Cape Parrot Big Birding Day April 2015

The Cape Parrot Big Birding Day (CPBBDD) was initiated in 1998, and has been held annually since as part of the conservation effort of the Cape Parrot Working Group. The aim is to determine their occurrence and obtain an accurate population estimate of Cape Parrots. This year was the 18th CPBBDD which is generally extended over a Saturday afternoon and Sunday morning of the following day. This makes up for poor weather on one of the days and allows an afternoon and a morning estimate. The higher of these for each province is then used to give the maximum number counted.

This year the count was earlier in April rather than May as several areas had requested this. The areas of South Africa covered by the count included the Eastern Cape, KZN and Limpopo Provinces. Sadly this year the weather on one or two of the days was poor in some of the areas. Unfortunately in addition the forest areas around Mthatha (Umtata) were affected by strikes and it was not safe for observers so for that population estimate the number of parrots seen there in 2014 was used*.

The maximum number of Cape Parrots counted in 2015 (including the above mentioned correction) was 459 in KZN, 427* in the former Transkei, 554 in the former Eastern Cape and 68 in Limpopo Province. This suggests that there were at least 1508* in the wild on the CPBBDD in 2015 which is higher than the maximum count of 1344 in 2013 when weather also had an impact. This supports that there are less than 1600 Cape Parrots in the wild (as reported by Downs et al. 2014).

The annual CPBBDD also highlights the importance of South Africa's Afromontane/-temperate indigenous forest patches and their associated grasslands for species other than Cape Parrots: including Samango Monkeys (*Cercopithecus mitis*), Southern Ground Hornbills (*Bucorvus leadbeateri*), Cape Vulture (*Gyps coprotheres*), African Crowned Eagle (*Stephanoaetus coronatus*) and Martial Eagle (*Polemaetus bellicosus*).

CPBBDD organizers are most grateful to all those who participated this year, particularly the co-ordinators and those volunteers who have participated for many years. CPBBDD organizers express continued gratitude for the effort, enthusiasm and continued support of the co-ordinators. They are also grateful for the contribution of Border Bird Club, DAFF, DEAT, Rance Timbers, Sappi and Mondi foresters, Indwe Security, and Eastern Cape Parks and Tourism Agency and Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife officials (particularly those from Coleford Nature Reserve), and the Armours who host the University of KwaZulu-Natal students near Ingeli.

Cape Parrot Day 2016 will be on 16 and 17th April 2016– please diarise!

Thank you to William Horsfield for contributions to this issue and Dallas and Donald Kemp for their breeding story.

Cape Parrot Newsletter Editor:
Preshnee Singh

CONTACT DETAILS

Prof. Colleen Downs
School of Life Sciences
University of KwaZulu-Natal
P/Bag X01, Scottsville, 3209
Email: downs@ukzn.ac.za
Tel: +27-33-2605127
cell: 0829202026