

# sparkling.

## THE passion

Kruger National Park

TEXT KEITH BARNES

WHEREAS SOME people go to mosques, temples or churches to find salvation, others have an alternative spiritual home. Mine is the Kruger National Park. I feel as though I was baptised there, married there and, if it were permitted, I would have my ashes scattered in the place. It is where my essence belongs and I would not be surprised to find that many fellow South African wildlife enthusiasts feel the same way.

My Kruger journey began back in 1983, somewhere on the outskirts of Roodepoort. Eleven years old and sporting pastel pink jeans and a perm, I had just broken up with my first girlfriend. One Sunday, while I was moping around the Walter Sisulu National Botanical Garden, a pair of silhouettes appeared ominously in the sky. The dark giants circled and performed a striking fly-by and all I could see were a bright yellow cere, glistening eye and bold white patterning on the wings and back.

I was smitten. My first true love was a pair of Verreaux's Eagles and that first girlfriend was quickly forgotten. Most of the winter holidays during my early high-school years were spent perched above the birds' eyrie, taking notes and making pencil sketches of the eagles and their chicks, their prey and

their behaviour. Although both my *Roberts* and *Newman's* were well thumbed, my bible was Peter Steyn's *Birds of Prey of Southern Africa*. I devoured that book and have crystal-clear memories of the plates, lovingly illustrated to make those magnificent raptors come alive for readers. Those images also caused a young boy newly obsessed with raptors to dream of the place where he might see the immense Martial Eagle, unbelievable Bateleur and leviathan Lappet-faced Vulture. Those dreams all led to the same place: Kruger.

Until that time, 'other birds' had been a handy distraction while I was watching the Verreaux's Eagles, but they were no longer asides and I became as interested in sunbirds as in goshawks. After I matriculated and before heading to the FitzPatrick Institute at the University of Cape Town to study ornithology,



ALBERT FRONEMAN (2)

I pleaded with my parents to take me to Kruger. They duly obliged and the trip fired a passion and an awakening that burn to this day.

On that six-day trip I was like a child discovering that Santa was real. Many of my first encounters with the most magnificent of Africa's raptors occurred on that visit, but I also suddenly realised that there were many equally spectacular birds, like the hideously beautiful Southern Ground-Hornbill, the stoic Kori Bustard and the bizarre >

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Saddle-billed Stork. And some of the smaller birds were just as absorbing: a Yellow-billed Oxpecker on a white rhinoceros; flocks of helmet-shrikes snapping and clicking away; and the deep, mournful hoot of a Grey-headed Bush-shrike in the camps. All these are experiences etched into my memory.

Kruger delivered a journey of discovery and, like most kids and first-time visitors, I didn't really think too much about the status of

the park or the bigger picture of the issues it faced. I just revelled in my exploration. At the time, I regarded Kruger as a giant sanctuary of epic proportions, impregnable and everlasting. As far as I was concerned, the people in charge were going to be able to protect it and all its inhabitants forever. Such a sweet thing is naivety! However, there is also a beautiful innocence in naivety and it has its place. More than a few dedicated big-cat watchers

have been sent scrambling for a bird book after seeing their first Lilac-breasted Roller swoop down from a branch to catch a cricket in front of their car. That kaleidoscope of electric blues, browns and pinks turns them into birders instantly. Indeed, a significant number of southern Africa's birders have had a spark moment in the park and it has changed their lives for the better. Even pre-existing birders are blown away by what they find on their first visits. The place leaves its mark on almost everyone. It is a game changer. And the naivety of that pure discovery that only a place like Kruger can offer needs to be enjoyed for what it is: an awakening.

I went away overawed and determined to make a career of ornithology and bird conservation. I completed an MSc in Conservation Biology at the Fitz-titute and then took a job at UCT's Animal Demography Unit, where my task was coordinating and compiling the first IBA directory and updating the Red Data Book for BirdLife South Africa.

It was during this time that wide-eyed innocence morphed into realism. I soon learned that there are serious landscape issues that threaten many species both within and beyond Kruger, and that the park alone is not enough to safeguard many ecosystems and species. Being able to attend several meetings in and around the park allowed me to continue my love affair, but I saw the sanctuary with different eyes. The issues were complex and needed considerable research, understanding and management. However, the majesty of the place still inspired newcomer and old-hand alike. A late-season flush of rain and greenery had me marveling at aggregations of Montagu's and Pallid harriers, birds that face perilous hazards on their journeys to and from the Palearctic, and flocks of Dusky Larks, nomadic

species that appear and vanish, only using Kruger temporarily. It became apparent that Kruger was only one piece in a larger jigsaw puzzle. It was in a matrix requiring management and, even then, for many species we were doing an imperfect job. It was like watching an ageing parent and for the first time realising that they are vulnerable, not superhuman.

It was only after the Red Data Book was published in 2000 that some of the realities of conservation in South Africa hit home the hardest. Having summarised the issues, I thought that as we were now aware of these situations we would change policy and protect the affected species, improving their status. But that is simply not the way it works. The machinations of policy change are slow and often flawed. Many of Kruger's large terrestrial birds and raptors, particularly the vultures, continue to decline. Most species are worse off in 2016 than they were when assessed in 2000. In addition, the park is at war with rhino poachers and, understandably, all efforts are directed at stopping this scourge. Unfortunately, however, this also means that other species that are in trouble are neglected out of temporary necessity.

But it is not all doom and gloom. While the park authorities are currently occupied with fighting poaching, it has fallen to external non-governmental organisations (NGOs) to step in and work on specialised groups of organisms, in partnership with the park. When it comes to birds, it is mostly BirdLife South Africa and the Endangered Wildlife Trust (EWT) that come to the fore and assist with the conservation work for birds.

André Botha, EWT's Birds of Prey Programme Manager since 2004, has a story similar to mine. An addiction to the old national parks' journal, *Custos*, as a seven



**A SIGNIFICANT NUMBER OF SOUTHERN AFRICA'S BIRDERS HAVE HAD A SPARK MOMENT IN THE PARK AND IT HAS CHANGED THEIR LIVES FOR THE BETTER**

year old led to a career in conservation and birds that still allows him to wake up every day with an 'I can't believe I do this for a living' feeling. André gets to spend an amazing amount of time in the park, working on the many species of threatened birds of prey, as well as on Southern Ground-Hornbills. However, his enthusiasm is also tempered by the reality of what he does and the serious threats facing his favourite subjects. Without dedicated conservationists like him, there would be no solutions to these problems. And, of course, these problems evolve and each year new and different issues arise, and it is up to André and his ilk to help solve them.

Looking to the future, André says, 'Although the rhino

poaching is bad, it is possibly just the beginning. It is likely to spread to elephants, lions and vultures if nothing is done to address the situation. Also, the fact that the elephant population is beyond the park's carrying capacity is a real threat to many birds and other animals in Kruger. Elephants impact significantly on woodland and change it profoundly, especially the riverine ecosystems. Disturbance by tourists and electrocution on powerlines is a serious issue for many large birds of prey. But fortunately key trouble areas have been identified and we are in the process of mitigating these.

'Birds that use rivers, especially large ones such as the Olifants, are heavily affected by pollution and the reduced quality and quantity of water, which are often caused by activities upstream, outside the park.' Work with authorities to improve these situations is ongoing, but determining issues regarding the water rights of Kruger versus those of the adjacent industrialised and heavily farmed escarpment areas is both difficult and politically complicated. >

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ALBERT FRONEMAN (2)



**Keith Barnes** loved Kruger at first sight. He got to know it and its conservation issues better when he was coordinator of the *Important Bird Areas of Southern Africa* (1998) and the *Eskom Red Data Book of South Africa, Lesotho and Swaziland* (2000) projects. The culmination of his time spent in this amazing place will come full circle with the publication of two books in mid-2016: *Birds of Kruger National Park* and *Animals of Kruger National Park* (WILDGuides/Princeton University Press).

The work done by BirdLife South Africa and the EWT is both crucial and complementary to the efforts of park authorities. These days a good deal of Kruger's conservation work is carried out by associated NGOs and concerned special interest groups, and it is becoming apparent that these entities are increasingly important for biodiversity management of much state-owned land.

**T**he Kruger National Park has been the single most inspirational place for many generations of South African birders, igniting our interest and feeding our development. To watch it and its magical wildlife ailing is sad. We need to do something, every single one of us. Please consider digging deep to help any organisation that has active conservation projects in

the park, protecting its birds and habitats, and helping the communities of people who live adjacent to it. Volunteer your time, contribute some money, spread the word, tell a friend. Without this assistance, this temple may wither. That would be both unacceptable and soul-destroying for generations of wildlife enthusiasts who were first inclined to stop behind a car with a *Bird-watching – please pass* bumper sticker and ask 'Excuse me, what bird are you looking at?'

What is far clearer today is that neither the park authorities nor the NGOs alone can save Kruger. It needs everyone with a financial, spiritual and an ethical investment in the place to help protect what is frequently acknowledged as one of earth's last true wilderness areas. So if you love Kruger, go on, get involved. ♦

## Participate in CONSERVATION PROJECTS

The aim of BirdLife South Africa's **Threatened Species** project is to collect location and abundance data of threatened bird species using the BirdLasser mobile application. Birders are requested to provide additional information, such as the number of birds seen and breeding activity, for threatened bird species. Contact Ernst Retief at [ernst.retief@birdlife.org.za](mailto:ernst.retief@birdlife.org.za)

The **Turning Kruger Green** project aims to collect data about avian distribution and reporting rates within the Greater Kruger National Park and adjacent developed areas so that comparisons between them can be made. If you can help with much-needed funding for transport and accommodation for the project's team, contact Peter Lawson (project leader) at [peter@lawsons-africa.co.za](mailto:peter@lawsons-africa.co.za) or Duncan McKenzie (SABAP2 Regional Co-ordinator: Mpumalanga) at [drmckenzie@cybersmart.co.za](mailto:drmckenzie@cybersmart.co.za)

The objective of researchers involved in the **Hooded Vulture Ecology in SANParks** project is to better understand the biology of the Critically Endangered Hooded Vulture in the Kruger National Park and surrounding protected areas. Nest site selection, feeding ecology and breeding success are of particular interest, and nests will be observed remotely using infra-red camera traps to monitor breeding and identify nest predators. The public can assist by reporting Hooded



**HOODED VULTURE** JOHANN GROBBELAAR

Vulture nest locations to [lindojano@yahoo.com](mailto:lindojano@yahoo.com), and marked Hooded Vultures (with wing tags) to [andreb@ewt.org.za](mailto:andreb@ewt.org.za), with the location, wing tag number, date and time.

The goal of the **Martial Eagle Conservation** work is to understand the causes of Martial Eagle declines in the Kruger National Park by studying the breeding and behaviour of the species. The eagles are colour ringed with unique ring combinations to determine their survival rates. The public can assist by reporting marked birds to [martialeaglesightings@gmail.com](mailto:martialeaglesightings@gmail.com) with an accurate location, ring description, date and time.