



PETER RYAN

## fynbos icon

The Bird of the Year for 2021, the Cape Rockjumper *Chaetops frenatus*, is not only an example of the charismatic birds found in South Africa, but a model for studying the potential impacts of climate change on South Africa's unique avian heritage. Over the past decade the species, Red Data-listed and considered Near Threatened, has been the focus of research based at the FitzPatrick Institute at the University of Cape Town, and at Nelson Mandela and Rhodes universities. These projects have provided valuable information about various aspects of the biology and overall ecology of the Cape Rockjumper, increasing our knowledge of the life history of this fynbos endemic.

With the exception of the much-photographed individuals at Rooi Els on the Western Cape coast, this

above The male Cape Rockjumper, with his piercing red eyes and black face with white malar stripe, is a strikingly beautiful bird.



colourful and vocal species is associated mostly with the higher-altitude, rocky slopes of the Cape Fold Mountains. As a terrestrial bird, the open habitat of mountain fynbos suits this species best, as it can keep a close eye on potential predators by hopping up onto large boulders. In other parts of the fynbos, vegetation recovery after fire soon produces dense habitat that is difficult for this species to navigate, and evidence reflects lower nesting success in such areas. It also has lower breeding success in hot weather, partly because its arch enemy, the chick- and

egg-eating boomslang, thrives in the increasing temperatures associated with climate change. Cape Rockjumpers have to adjust their behaviour in high temperatures as, instead of coping with the heat by panting (which means losing water), they hide in the limited shade that fynbos provides.

The species is a facultative cooperative breeder and the dominant male in a territory will occasionally be assisted by a younger, up-and-coming male. The female tends to work equally hard, regardless of the number of helpers. She usually lays two, sometimes three eggs in a nest on the ground, partially sheltered by a nearby boulder. Adults provision their chicks for up to 22 days, usually supplying insects and other invertebrates, but also offering the odd gecko or chameleon. The chicks are vulnerable to being preyed on by mongooses, honey badgers and snakes. The rockjumper's territory is maintained year-round and is defended by both the male and female by way of loud calls and dramatic fanned tail displays to ward off competing neighbours.

The easiest places to see Cape Rockjumpers are at Rooi Els and its associated hills, and the Swartberg Pass north of Oudtshoorn. Of course, those who are energetic enough to climb mountain peaks may find the birds on almost all of the rocky and exposed ridges of the Cape Fold Mountains through the Western Cape and into the Eastern Cape. Good locations for such exploration are the Wolfberg Arch in the Cederberg or Blue Hill Nature Reserve near Uniondale, which has been the focus of much rockjumper research over the past eight years.

ALAN LEE AND KRISTA OSWALD

