inbox

We'd like to hear from you, and you are welcome to send us your birding questions, observations or sightings for inclusion in these pages. Accompanying images should be sent as high-res jpgs (ie at 300 dpi) and be between 1 and 3MB in size. Send your contributions to *editor@birdlife.org.za*. Letters may be edited for clarity or length. The opinions expressed here do not necessarily reflect the policies of BirdLife South Africa.

FLASHY FEATHERS

I photographed this Meves's Starling in late December 2019, about 300 metres from the Pafuri picnic site in the Kruger National Park. I wondered if this sort of aberration is frequently encountered?

ANDREW TURTON

Professor Peter Ryan comments: This appears to be a case of partial leucism, with the tail feathers lacking pigmentation. The fact that it's symmetrical and seemingly confined to the tail makes for a very striking individual.

ANOTHER **FISHING LINE VICTIM**

Further to Herman van der Walt's account of the hooked (then fortunately un-hooked) Giant Kingfisher in the January/February issue, I can report a similar event (but with no happy ending) from some years ago.

In September 1994, the late Duncan Christie – a veterinarian and member of BirdLife Lowveld – called me to ask if I'd be interested in the body of a Narina Trogon. He had retrieved it from the branch of a tree along the Crocodile River at Waterval Boven (now known as Emgwenya), Mpumalanga, and knew that I used to create measured drawings of dead birds. The trogon had evidently been fooled by a 'trout fly' attached to a hook that had been snagged and left by a fly-fisherman. Trogons capture most of their prey – cicadas and other flying insects – by hawking out from a perch like a bee-eater, so it is easy to imagine how the bird would have been attracted to a colourful lure swinging gently in the breeze.

This unfortunate trogon, a spectacular adult male, must have died after an awful struggle. It is yet another example of how discarded fishing-line and hooks pose such a danger to birds.

DUNCAN BUTCHART
HERMANUS, WESTERN CAPE

BREEDING **RECORD**

I read Tony Roberts and Hugh Chittenden's article on the first Ayres's Hawk Eagle breeding record in South Africa (*African Birdlife*, January/February 2020) with interest, as I was unaware that there had been no previous breeding records for the species in the country. My attention was drawn to this because when I was a student forester at KwaMbonambi State Forest (plantation) in Zululand in 1974, my mentor, senior forester Justin Coombes, took me to a mature eucalyptus belt between pine stands and showed me an occupied Ayres's Hawk Eagle nest in the crown of one of the trees, at least 20 metres up.

He never mentioned that it was not a nest that the eagles had constructed, so I assume it was. But he did tell me that the birds had been using the nest successively each year for the past while. Although I can't remember what month it was, it was in the middle of the year and I recall that most forestry activities in close proximity of the nest were stopped until the chick fledged. I was only 19 years old at the time and in those days I had no idea how important the sighting was or even how to submit a formal record. However, it remains my first Ayres's Hawk Eagle record for my now southern African life list and it validates Tony and Hugh's suggestion that these raptors have probably been breeding in low numbers in northern KwaZulu-Natal for many years.

ROB LITTLE
FITZPATRICK INSTITUTE, UCT

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SUNNYSIDE **UP**

On 7 November 2019 we were visiting Mkuze Game Reserve in KwaZulu-Natal and at midday we came across a rather bizarre sighting – hundreds of European Bee-eaters sitting on the tar road! The temperature gauge in the car registered 43 ^{0}C, so one can only imagine the heat of the tar road.

The birds would fly down, spread their wings and throw their heads back, arching their necks. They remained motionless for a few minutes before flying into the overhanging branches and shade.

We watched these hundreds of birds 'sunbathing' for approximately 30 minutes, keeping our distance so as not to disturb them. Then suddenly they were gone.

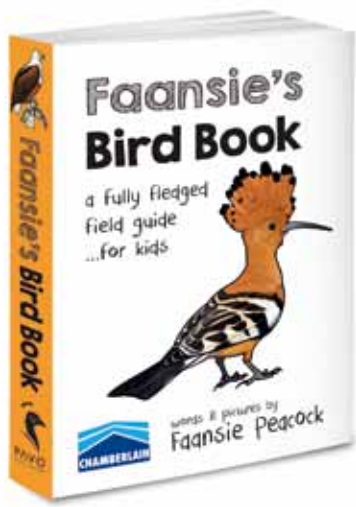
I have not been able to find an explanation for this behaviour, other than to read it is called 'broken-neck' posture. There was no mention of whether this was used to rid themselves of unwanted parasites. Could you explain why they would choose to do this? Is this behaviour common to other bee-eaters?

LIZ COOK

Professor Peter Ryan comments: Sunning is frequently observed in all bee-eaters and it is often a social affair among colonial breeding species such as the European Bee-eater. Most sunning occurs while the bird is perched, raising its back and neck feathers while facing away from the sun, and frequently bending the neck to one side in the so-called 'broken-neck' posture. However, most species have also been recorded sunning on the ground, prostrating themselves with spread wings and tails, and heads raised in the manner photographed by Liz in Mkuze.

Hilary Fry, the leading expert on bee-eaters, notes that such behaviour usually occurs on sandy banks in the late afternoon and that birds may remain in this position for minutes at a time. The choice of a tar road in the heat of the day is perhaps unusual and the extremely hot conditions may have caused the birds to occasionally retire to the shade to cool off.

The behaviour is thought to aid in feather maintenance, particularly of the flight feathers. As hole-nesting birds, bee-eaters typically suffer from large numbers of ectoparasites, and Fry surmises that the sun's rays, together with the associated heat, stimulate feather parasites to be more active, making them easier to preen off. Sunning might also promote the release of oil from the preen gland, as the rump feathers are often raised, exposing the gland. Ground sunning is usually recorded close to breeding colonies and this observation among wintering birds is particularly interesting. ◆



WIN!

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