



# Lessons IN lockdown

## Covid-19 – a boon for birds?

PETER RYAN

As Covid-19 lockdowns swept the world, there were numerous reports of how wildlife adapted to the new normal. Some of the more outrageous stories turned out to be as fake as a Trump White House briefing, but it was clear that with far fewer people and cars out and about, normally shy wildlife was quick to take advantage of the situation. **Peter Ryan** canvassed birders to try to piece together how birds responded to the unprecedented reduction in human activity.

One of the first reports came from Chengdu, China, 1000 kilometres west of the epidemic's origin in Wuhan. By the end of January 2020, this normally bustling metropolis of more than 16 million people was a ghost town. One of the few people brave enough to venture out was birder Steven Bonta, who reported his observations in a blog on *ShanghaiBirding.com*. Most birds in China have a tough time, being hunted or harassed by people. But within days of the self-imposed lockdown, a host of normally scarce or reclusive

species was feeding out in the open, from White-browed Laughingthrushes and Chinese Grosbeaks to Plumbeous Redstarts and Rosy and Olive-backed pipits. And the Grey Herons and Little Egrets were no longer confined to an island in the centre of the river through the city, but happily feeding all along its banks.

As lockdowns were enforced beyond China, sightings of urban wildlife proliferated almost as fast as the virus. Most were of mammals – coyotes in downtown Chicago, wild boars in Barcelona and pumas in Santiago. And it wasn't

just in towns. Black bears in Yosemite National Park came out into open meadows more often after the park was closed to the public and a pride of lions sleeping on a tar road in the Kruger National Park attracted media attention. Even some marine mammals took advantage of the situation, with a South American sea lion exploring a town in southern Peru and orcas seen closer to Seattle than is normally the case. But it wasn't all good news. In Thailand, hundreds of crab-eating macaques went on the rampage as the handouts from tourists to the

Lopburi 'monkey temple' dried up. And in Nara, Japan, the habituated sika deer left the parks to wander the city streets in search of food.

The evidence for birds was less striking, but it seemed that at least some started to venture into areas where previously they were excluded by human traffic. In the northern hemisphere, where the lockdowns were introduced in spring, concern was voiced that this might lead to birds breeding in places where, post-lockdown, they would be unable to complete their breeding attempt. For example, if Little Terns began to breed on a closed beach, they would be overrun by people and dogs when the lockdown was lifted. But with the pandemic dragging on, hopefully this wasn't too much of a problem.

So, what happened in South Africa after the lockdown was imposed on 27 March 2020? A major challenge of being stuck at home is that we only see one tiny part of the picture. To try to get a more holistic view, two weeks into the lockdown I put out an appeal on several birding forums asking people if they had noticed any behavioural changes in their local birds. My hope was that by pooling our collective experiences we could infer meaningful changes from the multitude of anecdotes.

The call elicited more than a hundred responses from birders around the country, as well as in Zimbabwe, Argentina, Portugal and the UK. Initially, most people reported at least some change in bird behaviour, but this probably reflected a bias towards reporting 'interesting' findings. A second appeal, 10 days later, specifically asked people to report even when it seemed to be 'business as usual' for their garden birds. Feedback from this second call suggested that at least half of the respondents detected nothing unusual during the lockdown. This was particularly the case in small towns and more rural settings, where the impact of the lockdown on human activity was less marked.

Another issue to consider when interpreting the reports was the increased observation effort during the lockdown.



MARTIN KNOETZE

Most birders have some kind of list, even if it's only a mental one, of the birds seen from their houses. So they were quick to report birds they'd seldom or never seen before. However, few of us have spent five weeks under house arrest; you only have to sample a few of the YouTube videos posted during the lockdown to realise that lots of people had way too much time on their hands. And with lockdown birding challenges keeping the twitchers entertained, it was inevitable that people reported lots of new species for their garden lists.

Some of these new records were heard rather than seen and this flagged another problem with interpreting the reports. Just as the air became wonderfully clean without thousands of cars rushing hither and thither, noise pollution also diminished, allowing us to hear birds from farther away. Was that Cape Spurfowl heard in the heart of Observatory, outside Cape Town, really a new record for the area or just one calling along the Black River, almost a kilometre away? Many people reported that the birds were singing more loudly than normal, but this probably was an artefact of the reduction in background traffic noise. Under normal

above *The Violet-backed Starling typically occurs in savanna and riparian woodland. On 19 April 2020, Martin Knoetze was excited to have this stunning male arrive in Secunda, in the heart of the grassland biome. On 30 April a female was seen nearby, suggesting that this wasn't an isolated incident.*

opposite *A large flock of Sacred Ibis feeding next to a busy road in Muizenberg, just after sunrise on the last day of Level 5 lockdown. Their numbers dwindled within a few days of early morning exercise sessions being allowed under Level 4 lockdown restrictions.*

conditions, urban birds sing louder but simpler songs than their rural relatives, so they can be heard in the noisy soundscape. If anything, we might predict that they would sing more softly in the absence of the pervasive urban traffic drone.

Given such uncertainties, I was more interested in changes in bird behaviour than unusual species, but some curious range changes were reported nonetheless. There were lots of sightings of out-of-range raptors – to be expected given the increased observer effort. Some were truly unexpected, like the immature Cape Vulture photographed by Jono >





NEITHARD GRAF VON DÜRCKHEIM



WERNER SMIT

above, left Neithard Graf von Dürckheim was surprised to see a Brown-headed Parrot in his Pretoria garden on 26 April. With parrots, one always has to consider the possibility of an escape, but there have been a few previous Gauteng records of this species and several other Pretoria birders reported an influx of woodland species during lockdown.

above, right Many people reported Spotted Eagle-Owls occurring in their gardens for the first time or more regularly than prior to the lockdown. Werner Smit photographed this one being mobbed by a Crested Barbet in his Middelburg garden.

Greenway on an Mhlanga high-rise building. But it does seem as though more raptors were prepared to fly over urban areas once there were fewer people around. Spotted Eagle-Owls, Wood Owls and Fiery-necked Nightjars were also recorded more often, although the quieter environment may have made it easier to hear them at night.

Several birds more typical of savanna or woodland habitats were recorded from the suburbs of Johannesburg and Pretoria, including multiple first records of Grey Hornbills from Johannesburg

gardens. Perhaps the most unusual record was of a Brown-headed Parrot in Lynnwood Glen, Pretoria. Three people in Gauteng and North West Province had Thick-billed Weavers in their gardens for the first time, but the species disappeared from another Joburg garden. Such mixed signals are to be expected if species are changing their routines and in this regard it seems that several urban-adapted birds definitely responded to the lockdown.

The House Sparrow is arguably the bird that has best adapted to living with people. And here the signal was unanimous – every report that mentioned House Sparrows said they had increased in abundance in peoples' gardens. Several observers noted that they had occurred in smaller numbers in their usual haunts in commercial areas, seemingly in response to the reduction in food scraps. In the same vein, numbers of Hartlaub's Gulls dwindled in central Cape Town as urban food sources dried up.

The Pied Crow is another opportunistic species that featured in several reports. It also became less regular in areas where human activity usually created reliable scavenging opportunities, such

as in school grounds and along roads where roadkill features on the menu. However, the birds were reported to be more frequently seen around the fringes of towns, presumably searching for other food sources.

Hadedas and Helmeted Guineafowl also were mentioned by many observers. Guineafowl generally became more prevalent in built-up areas, thanks to the reduction in human traffic. Christa Mynhardt even saw one shepherding five small chicks in the parking lot of Waterfall Mall in Rustenburg. But they were less frequently seen in some previously favoured areas, including disappearing entirely from one national park camp site where prior to the lockdown they cadged scraps from campers. And it wasn't just guinea fowl taking advantage of the quieter streets; many other birds took to feeding along roads and verges.

By comparison, all reports of Hadedas from across the country noted how they became less common, at least early on during the lockdown. It took me 10 days to get one for my lockdown list, and Albert van Reenen, who used to have them daily in his Stellenbosch garden, noted that they only returned after more than

four weeks' absence. I have no explanation for this consistent pattern, but Geoff Lockwood reported how quickly the Hadedas in Delta Park, Joburg, became nervous around people. Within days of the lockdown, Hadedas that had largely ignored the many people moving through the park now flushed, calling loudly, every time someone came into view.

This response is at odds with what was generally reported for other birds. Just as many mammals began to venture into the open more often than is usually the case, there were reports of birds being more relaxed close to human habitation. Normally shy birds such as Lemon and Tambourine doves were seen in the open to a greater degree than before the lockdown. One of the more intriguing patterns reported was for birds to be seen in unusually large flocks. I had multiple reports of Cape White-eyes moving through in bigger flocks than usual, as well as huge flocks of Red-winged Starlings from Salt River, Cape Town, Olive Thrushes from Durbanville, Speckled and African Olive pigeons from Sedgefield, and Sacred Ibis from Midrand and Muizenberg.

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In terms of bird numbers, the responses were again mixed. Several people with bird feeders reported a drop in visitation rates immediately after the lockdown came into effect, to the extent that fruit was going rotten on the feeder and seed dispensers took four times longer than usual to be emptied. Intrigued, I asked people with feeders to let me know their experiences.

More than 40 people responded, giving information on nearly 70 feeders, and although the responses were mixed, two-thirds reported no change in feeder



PETER RYAN

use. All three people with suet feeders reported an increase in the rate at which the feeders emptied and nectar feeders also seemed to either attract more customers or there was no marked change. By comparison, fruit and seed feeders saw both increases and decreases. One of the more telling responses came from Grant Fairley in Kyalami, who has two seed feeders – one on a smallholding, where consumption dropped by almost half, and another in an estate playground, where it increased slightly. This suggests that birds moved into areas where previously there was more disturbance.

Wetlands and the coast are two habitats where human activity is strongly concentrated and the birds found here definitely benefited from the lockdown. There were several reports of kingfishers (Giant, Malachite and Half-collared) and African Fish Eagles occurring closer to human habitation than normally was the case. Purple Herons were seen feeding in the open more often and ducks ventured into the middle of rivers where previously they were excluded by boat traffic.

A video of a large flock of seabirds, dominated by Cape Cormorants and gulls, feeding on anchovy right at the

beach in Langebaan created a fuss on social media. Elsewhere along the coast, African Penguins took over the beach at Seaforth, roosting peacefully throughout the day; thousands of Cape Cormorants settled on the usually busy beaches at Plettenberg Bay; and Little Egrets and Grey Herons started feeding in the surf at Muizenberg.

The speed with which birds and other wildlife responded to the lockdown confirms that they are acutely aware of our activities. It provides yet another example of how large the human footprint on the planet has become. I can only hope that some good will come from the pandemic. If we can have this level of global response to Covid-19, perhaps we can band together to tackle the climate crisis and the other significant challenges to biodiversity on the planet. Failure to do so will result in much more severe and long-lasting impacts on the way we live than has been wrought by Covid-19. ♦