

# on the trail of the TAITA

TEXT BY ANDREW JENKINS



In September 2006, a group of 10 or so raptor enthusiasts gathered on a farm near Hoedspruit in the South African Lowveld to undertake a seemingly impossible task. The brief was to do a snap, two-week survey of the nearby cliffs for breeding pairs of the Taita Falcon *Falco fasciinucha*. 'What's so difficult about that?' I hear you ask from the comfort of your chair.

Well, if you've ever spent time in the eastern mountains of the Mpumalanga/Limpopo region, gaping down at the wonder of the Blyde River Canyon or craning your neck up at the towering, cloud-capped plateau of Mariepskop, you'll agree that this is expansive country. It's a landscape characterised by truly enormous red, grey and green walls of rock, presiding over the densest, greenest forest or the most tangled and thorny bushveld imaginable, and all of it trussed up together in an impenetrable, intractable barrier of epic proportions.

Similarly, if you've ever spent time watching or looking for Taita Falcons, you would surely acknowledge that these are tricky birds to get to grips with. When perched, they are tiny and immobile, and favour deeply shaded recesses on big, remote crags. In flight, they transform into a flickering blur, sizzling away into nothingness seemingly before you've had time to draw breath, let alone get your bins to your eyes.

At the outset of our 14-day boot-camp, the prospect of searching for these diminutive, turbo-charged cliff-nesters in the vastness of the eastern escarpment seemed daunting (if not downright stupid!). By the time we were done – hours and hours of sweaty effort and patient observation, and miles and miles of bruising driving and arduous, thorn-raked walking later – our worst fears had all but been confirmed. While it wasn't an absolutely impossible undertaking, it came uncomfortably close to it. ▽

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ANTHONY VAN ZYL (2)



**Top** Taita country? Hebronberg and the huge cliffs of the Mpumalanga escarpment stretch away to the south of Mariepskop.

**Above** Part of the Taita survey team between stints in the field. From left: Alan Stephenson, Lucia Rodrigues, Alan Harvey, Andrew Jenkins and Anthony van Zyl, with Strijdom Tunnel Taita guide, Michael Kumako.

So, if we knew from the outset that it was going to be such a struggle, what made us take on this seemingly hopeless mission? Well, for all its difficulties and challenges, the Taita is a pretty neat bird and, for people with a penchant, even a passion, for falcons, the chance to spend some time in this awesome environment, possibly finding and watching Taitas doing their thing, was probably sufficient motivation.

But more importantly, the Taita Falcon is a very rare and poorly known species, and our main goal was to figure out how

many pairs actually reside in the escarpment area. This was a requirement initially identified by a meeting of the Taita Falcon Interest Group, held in the area in February 2005 under the auspices of the Endangered Wildlife Trust's Birds of Prey Working Group (BoPWG). While there are only two confirmed breeding sites (one of which is well known to birders, situated near the J.G. Strijdom Tunnel on the Abel Erasmus Pass), there are enough incidental sightings of Taitas from other parts of the escarpment to suggest that there are more pairs in the area. The meeting concluded that it was a priority to get a more accurate idea of the size and relative importance of the local population. With probably fewer than 40 known and currently active Taita Falcon nest sites in the world, if we could increase the escarpment tally to between five and 10 pairs, then the South African birds could emerge as globally significant and worthy of special consideration and protection.

The team assembled to do the survey boasted a wealth of raptor- and falcon-watching experience. Alan Kemp and Dave Allan were probably the most established and widely respected names, while Anthony van Zyl, Ara Monadjem and I made up the slightly younger research scientist contingent. André Botha, manager of the BoPWG, brought NGO administrative

muscle and considerable birding skills to the party, while Alan Stephenson and Alan Harvey offered valuable, slightly different perspectives as falconers with years of experience with wild falcons. Lucia Rodrigues, an amateur and relative novice to this kind of work, provided morale-boosting enthusiasm, dogged determination and much-needed organisational acumen gleaned from a previous career in the corporate world. Dave Rushworth, environmentalist and long-time resident in the Hoedspruit area, was another vital cog in the survey machinery. Having blazed many of the surrounding hiking trails, and walked and birded in even the most out-of-the-way parts of the escarpment mountain chain, Dave is a phenomenal source of exactly the kind of local knowledge we needed to get the survey done quickly and effectively. Together with former provincial ornithologist Peter Milstein, Dave was the first to see Taitas in South Africa during the late 1980s, and has since recorded the species at a number of localities. We built our initial survey plan around these sightings, taking into consideration Dave's 'feel' for where additional breeding pairs were most likely to be found.

We had originally intended to look for Taitas along the entire length of the main eastern escarpment, from Graskop in the south to the Strijdom Tunnel in

the north. However, we soon realised that this was an unreasonable expectation, and opted rather to focus on the cliffs between Scotland Hill (just south of Mariepskop) and a point just north of the tunnel. Our *modus operandi* was simple: the 4–8 team members available on any given day were divided into groups of two, and each pair was posted at a possible nest site, equipped with binoculars, spotting scope, GPS and notebook, for anything up to seven to eight hours at a time, constantly on the lookout for signs of resident Taita Falcons, as well as any other cliff-nesting raptors present in the vicinity.

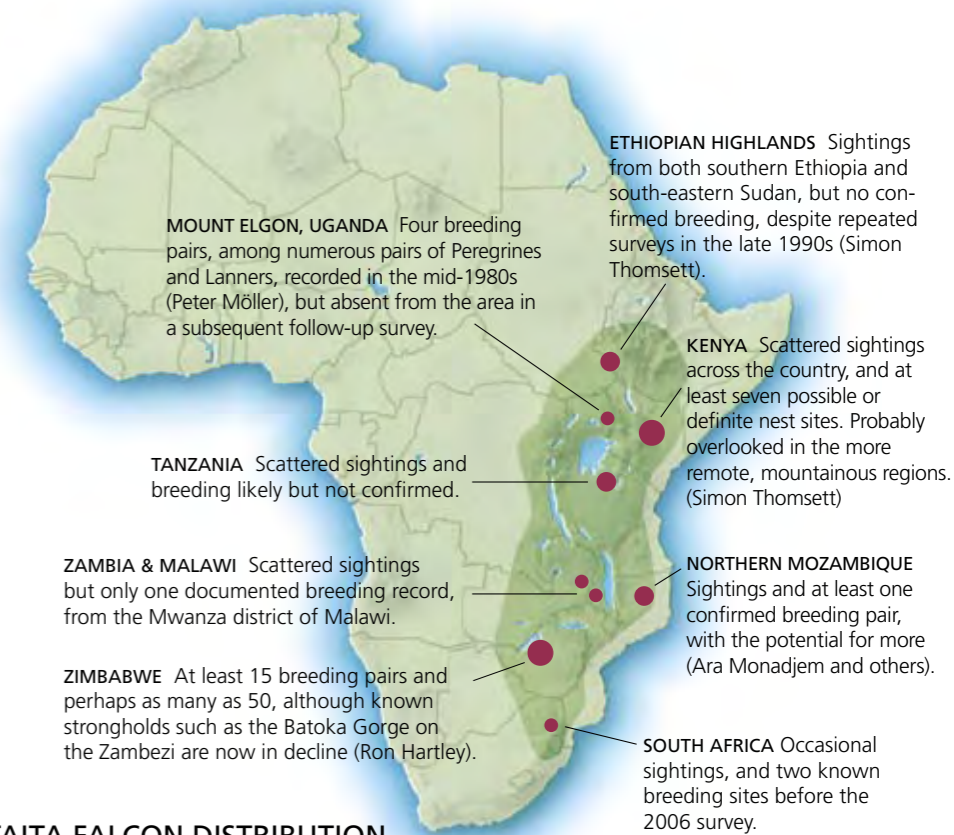
Quite often, good observation points either above or below the cliffs in question were extremely difficult to access, and we struggled to reach them in time to catch the Taitas' anticipated early morning activity peak, even on the single, notable occasion when we used a helicopter to drop us in position. We also did some helicopter survey work along the big cliffs of the main canyon area, but with very limited success, mostly because of weather and helicopter problems. In spite of these and other logistical and practical difficulties, which were inevitable given the nature of the ground we were trying to survey, we achieved pretty good coverage of our chosen area. We accumulated more than 50 person-days of effort at nearly 40 observation points along the escarpment, each situated in good view of a minimum of 50 potential Taita nest cliffs, spread along approximately 40 kilometres of very high cliffs.

The survey started at a canter with the location of a 'new' pair of adult Taitas on our first full day out. The birds were firmly established on



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**A pair of adult Taita Falcons, held in a captive-breeding pen in Zimbabwe.**



## TAITA FALCON DISTRIBUTION

a massive cliff on the northern extremity of the canyon and, on the morning we found them, were going through all their nuptial behaviours as a precursor to egg-laying. The excitement this find created gave the project a vital initial impetus, which was largely maintained throughout the fortnight. This despite the fact that we had no further success until day 11, when Dave Allan's inspired decision to check a low, riverine site, with distinctly different features to the habitat search image we'd been locked on up until then, paid off. He and his wife, Debbie, saw a single Taita Falcon aggressively mobbing a pair of Verreaux's Eagles at this surprisingly small cliff, and a subsequent watch confirmed that a pair of Taitas was in residence and apparently incubating a clutch of eggs. We had our second (and final) new nest!

Overall, the survey was a qualified success. Starting with a population of two known Taita Falcon sites, each with a history of breeding going back to the late '80s or early '90s, we were able to confirm these as still current and add another two confirmed nest sites. As testimony to the general thoroughness of the exercise, we also located three active Peregrine Falcon nest sites, 12 pairs of Lanners, 23 pairs of Rock Kestrels, five Verreaux's Eagle sites, three Black Stork sites, five Jackal Buzzard sites

and two pairs of White-necked Ravens. Under the circumstances, we are reasonably happy with these results. We doubled the known population of Taitas for South Africa, and plotted more than 50 nests of other important cliff-nesting birds, including 18 sites of Red-listed species.

However, we fell tantalisingly short of our self-imposed minimum target of five pairs of Taitas, and feel confident that a repeat survey in 2007, particularly if we include a shortlist of key locations which we didn't visit or survey fully in 2006, could very well reveal another pair or two. This would further support our view that the area holds a bona fide, and very valuable, population of these impressive, fascinating, but frustrating little falcons. □

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