NEWS FROM THE FITZPATRICK INSTITUTE

The Percy FitzPatrick Institute of African Ornithology at the University of Cape Town – familiarly referred to as the Fitztitute – is one of only a handful of ornithological research institutes in the world and is concerned primarily with studies of African birds. These studies cover a wide array of subjects, from genetics to ecology, distribution and behaviour. The many current projects include designing a system of reserves for conserving birds in Kenya and the arid regions of South Africa, gamebird population dynamics, explaining migration patterns, raptor research and the taxonomy of African larks.

Africa – Birds & Birding will carry regular news of the Fitztitute, firstly to keep our readers abreast of research developments at the Institute, and secondly to make readers aware of what the organization will be offering in the way of public involvement and education (courses, field trips, etc).

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION,
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The Namaqua Sandgrouse *Pterocles namaqua* is a common inhabitant of the arid regions of southern Africa. However, a Fitztitute study of the species' ecology has produced some concern about their well-being in farming areas of the Northern Cape.

The gravel plains of Bushmanland are a key breeding area for these sandgrouse, which nest on the ground in exposed situations. The study has found clutch survival to be startlingly low: in three years, 91 per cent of clutches never survived to hatching. Nearly all clutch loss is due to predators, especially the yellow mongoose *Cynictis penicillata*. When chicks do hatch, it is four to six weeks before they can fly, and during this time they are also at risk. The upshot of these high predation rates is that few young survive to replenish the adult population.

In this region, farmers are particularly thorough in their eradication of larger predators which occasionally kill sheep or lambs. After decades of such persecution, large raptors such as the Martial Eagle *Polemaetus bellicosus* and Tawny Eagle *Aquila rapax* have been hard hit. The removal of these large predators has, we think, resulted in a proliferation of smaller predators, such as mongooses (which would have been eaten by the eagles), to the detriment of the sandgrouse.

The sandgrouse research project is being carried out by Penn Lloyd and is sponsored by the African Gamebird Research, Education and Development Trust (Agred).

Although they breed in deserts and semi-deserts, water is a key requirement for sandgrouse. Male Namaqua Sandgrouse soak their belly feathers at waterholes and carry water in this way to their chicks. Here, chicks drink from the wetted belly.
PHOTOGRAPH: PENN LLOYD