

WHO'S THAT BIRDER?

Profiling avitourism in South Africa

South Africa has experienced rapid growth in tourism since the early 1990s, with the number of international visitors tripling over the past two decades. In 2008, the country welcomed more than nine million international tourists, who generated a direct expenditure of approximately R100-billion. South Africa attracted twice as many tourists as Australia or Brazil, but each tourist to Australia spends on average four times more than a tourist visiting South Africa. A new report identifies birding as a way to boost the value of tourism in this country.

Promoting niche markets is seen as one of the best ways to continue to grow a country's tourism industry and improve its value. In particular, it is desirable to enhance markets that attract tourists who make longer trips to the country and have a relatively high expenditure per day. Birding draws just such a market. In 2006 and 2007 BirdLife South Africa lobbied the Department of Trade and Industry (DTI) to promote avitourism as a niche market for growth. Avitourism is defined as travel outside a person's usual environment for the purpose of viewing birds in their natural habitats, and in terms of the DTI's criteria, a tourist is anyone travelling further than 40 kilometres from home.

In 2008, the DTI initiated a study into the avitourism market in South Africa. It was designed to assess the current state of avitourism and its economic impact, to identify market needs and unexploited opportunities, and to recommend steps to promote the sector. The findings of the study were published in three reports: one on research and analysis, one on opportunities and recommendations, and a summary document. All three are available as free downloads from the DTI website www.dti.gov.za or BirdLife South Africa's avitourism website www.birdingroutes.co.za.

Apart from a few disconcerting inconsistencies between the three reports, they make interesting reading. The summary document is the most accessible, but the research and analysis report contains the real details (although you might want to skip some of the background information on general tourism and policy issues). There is a wealth of useful information for anyone contemplating getting involved in the industry, ranging from visitor profiles and preferences to trip durations, favoured destinations and spending patterns. *Africa – Birds &*

Birding assisted with the study by conducting a reader survey to help profile the birding community interested in the region. This repeated a survey conducted by the magazine in 1997 that formed the basis of an earlier investigation into the nature and value of birding in South Africa (Turpie and Ryan 1998, BirdLife South Africa Research Series 1, 41 pp.).

The demographic data contain few surprises. Most birders are male (75 per cent in the 2009 survey, up from 67 per cent in 1997), and almost three-quarters come from households without children living at home. But contrary to popular belief, birders aren't getting older. During both surveys, the average South African birder was around 50 years old. However, there was a change in the location of domestic birders responding to the two surveys. Gauteng accounted for almost 40 per cent of birders in both surveys, but the Western Cape replaced KwaZulu-Natal in the number two spot in 2009.

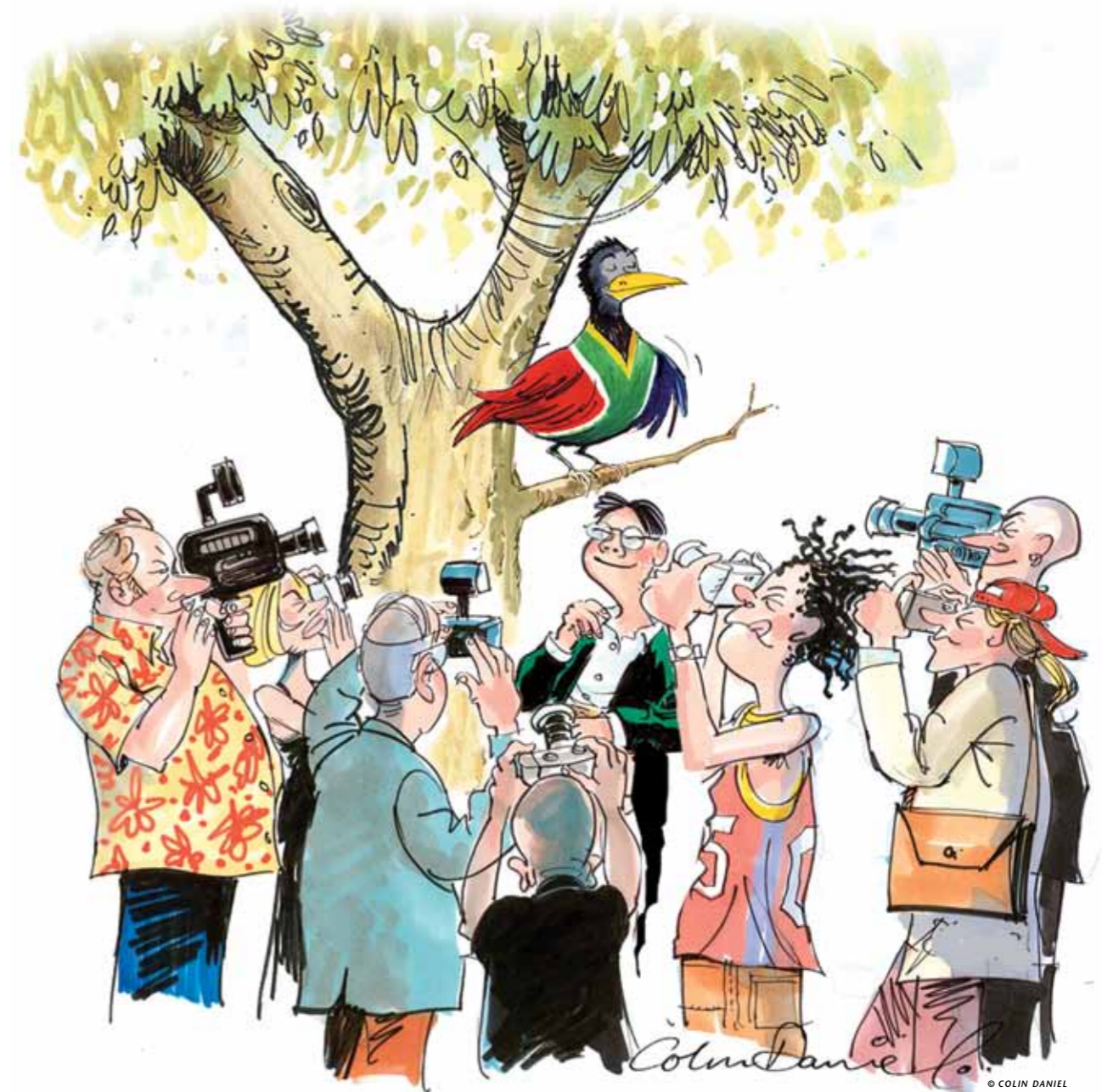
Among South African birders, overall expenditure on birding increased with the level of enthusiasm and commitment, from an average of R17 000 per year for casual birders, through R32 000 for enthusiastic birders to R48 000 among fanatical birders. This has grown by seven to eight per cent per year since the 1997 survey for casual and enthusiastic birders, slightly more than the rate of inflation, whereas spending by fanatical birders has grown at a more sedate four per cent per year.

Birders reported that more than a quarter of their bird-related expenditure was on equipment such as books and optical aids. Given the digital camera revolution, it is perhaps not surprising that about half of all equipment expenditure was on camera gear, even discounting the

proportion this was used for other, non-birding activities. Most of the remaining expenditure was on birding outings and trips. Again the amount increased with the level of interest in birding, but perhaps surprisingly, fanatical birders spent proportionally more on guided tours than did enthusiastic birders.

You might think that foreign birders visiting the region would spend considerably more on their hobby than South African birders, but this wasn't the case. On average, they fell between the enthusiastic and fanatical categories of South Africans in terms of annual expenditure on equipment and self-guided birding activities. The only area where they spent more money was on guided trips – perhaps influenced in part by a recent visit to South Africa!

Extrapolating up to the value of the sector as a whole relies on the numbers of birders active in the region – not an easy thing to measure. The study estimated that between 21 000 and 40 000 avitourists travelled in South Africa in 2009, of whom 40 per cent came from outside the country. In total, they spent between R800-million and R1 500-million on birding trips, support services and equipment. Adding in multiplier effects, this makes the industry worth at least R1-billion per year to South Africa's gross domestic product. This might seem unrealistically high, but it pales into insignificance relative to a recent study of the value of birding in the USA. This study reported that an estimated 48 million people in the United States are interested in birds, and of these 20 million travel away from home to watch birds. Birding was estimated to support more than 670 000 jobs in the USA and to contribute US\$36-billion in retail sales (trip and equipment expenditures) a year, with a total industry output of US\$82-billion.



Such estimates are important for convincing policy-makers that bird-based tourism has much to offer regional development plans. Birds are particularly valuable because range-restricted species spread the tourism base away from traditional hotspots such as national parks. The DTI study concluded that avitourism has a high growth potential. Progress stalled briefly as the tourism portfolio was moved from the DTI to the National Department of Tourism (NDT), but in 2011 the NDT worked with BirdLife South Africa to formulate a Strategic Development Plan for avitourism that is now available for comment at www.tourism.gov.za. An action and implementation plan completed in early 2012 will hopefully see government and SA Tourism promoting the avitourism industry.

Having read this far, you may be wondering what all this means for birders and, perhaps

more importantly, for birds. In theory, it should benefit both groups. Birders benefit from the creation of better birding facilities (for example, birder-friendly accommodation, hides and boardwalks), and birds benefit because their conservation is promoted. Local communities are more likely to conserve birds and their habitats if they realise an economic benefit through job creation and other forms of income generation. And even within protected areas, promoting birding tourism can generate resources that allow for better management. For example, the popular birding weekends in the Kruger National Park have brought in enough revenue to allow the purchase of a spotter plane used for anti-poaching operations and other management activities.

A recent review concluded that, relative to other forms of ecotourism, birding has the greatest potential to contribute to local communities,

educate people about the value of biodiversity, and create incentives for the successful conservation of natural areas (Sekercioglu 2002, *Environmental Conservation* 29: 282–289). Birds can thus act as umbrella species, enhancing the conservation of a broad cross-section of biodiversity.

However, birders must also weigh carefully their choices as avitourists. Sekercioglu's study highlighted the need to develop efficient mechanisms that will allow local human communities to benefit directly from birding activities, as well as to ensure that birders avoid disturbing the birds. And in the face of looming climate change, birders also need to consider the broader implications of their travel choices. Until there is a viable alternative to fossil fuels, birding trips will remain tinged with carbon guilt.

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