

# SUGAR rush



Cape Sugarbird

ROB SIMMONS (3)

One of the iconic sights and sounds of fynbos- and protea-dominated landscapes in the Western Cape is the endemic Cape Sugarbird with its chattering and its harsh 'shuishh' call.



The Cape Sugarbirds flock to feed on the custom-made syrup on offer.

The Cape Sugarbird *Promerops cafer* is a species that enthralls visiting birders, and even more casual viewers, with its long tail, swishing flight and habit of sitting proud on a prominent perch. Proteas are its favoured food plant and, at times, bushes of flowering mimetes or large stands of proteas can be alive with chattering sugarbirds flocking to feast on their nectar. In Table Mountain National Park, on the slopes that divide Glencairn from Fish Hoek in Cape Town's southern peninsula, flocks of up to 17 birds can be seen swarming over particularly large flowering mimetes bushes, and when food is concentrated, many more undoubtedly occur.

But despite its ubiquitous nature and well-known status, the Cape Sugarbird poses a few questions. For example, while some adults remain on Elsie's Peak, above Fish Hoek, to breed from as early as June, the young birds seem to leave the montane fynbos between

November and March. We assume that these seasonal movements are timed to coincide with the flowering of proteas in different areas.

By ringing birds in different regions, ornithologists studying them have been able to determine that sugarbirds do indeed fly long distances: one individual was found more than 360 kilometres from its point of capture. We have yet to discover whether the birds return to favoured patches to feed and perhaps make a long round trip, visiting all available plants as they go. In a bid to find out more about their movements, Dr Phoebe Barnard of the South African National Biodiversity Institute (SANBI) at Kirstenbosch has started colour-ringing birds on the slopes of Elsie's Peak. She is liaising with other ringers in the region to determine if the sugarbirds do indeed visit a favoured patch of flowers in certain seasons, and how fire and climate influence their movements. Receiving reports of colour-ringed birds will greatly help in solving this puzzle.

Being so reliant upon a few indigenous flowering plant species does have its drawbacks for the birds. The Western Cape's winter rains are predicted to

decline as an effect of climate change, leading to reduced soil moisture. This may result in a greater number of fires, which in itself may change the flowering frequency or even the flowering season of proteas. Modelling by SANBI of how future climates will influence where proteas occur suggests that the ranges of some proteas will contract southwards. The area covered by some protea species will also reduce, making it more difficult for large populations of sugarbirds to survive. Critical areas for sugarbirds may no longer support proteas and the birds will be forced to look elsewhere for food. And if higher temperatures (or fires) drive the sugarbirds away, their pollination services may be reduced, in turn causing protea numbers to decrease.

In the face of these uncertain scenarios, some sugarbirds on Table Mountain do appear to have found sweet support in the form of a resident in the South Peninsula.

Réné Delpont, who has been offering a specially formulated syrup to wild sugarbirds for about five years, has a garden alive with sugarbirds singing, fighting, displaying and feeding. Indeed, they are so accustomed to being fed that as she appears early in the morning, the birds

swarm onto her hands, clamouring for the first feed and standing on one another's backs in a bid to get first dip into the vitamin-enriched syrup. Up to 30 birds have been recorded in her garden at any one time.

While some may believe that feeding wild birds is disruptive to their natural foraging ability and behaviour, we should consider that Mrs Delpont's garden, like most of ours, has usurped a habitat previously utilised by birds. By feeding the birds she is, in essence, replacing what man has already destroyed. Feeding has many pros and cons, but from a research point of view we were delighted to hear of this as it provided an easy way of resighting colour-ringed birds. A single morning's observations alone yielded four wild colour-ringed birds and even those with just a numbered metal ring could be read as they sat on René's hand.

This may mean that the many early mornings spent colour-ringing on nearby Elsie's Peak will be rewarded with resightings of sugarbirds, allowing us to gather more data on this fascinating icon of the fynbos biome.

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If you see a colour-ringed Cape Sugarbird, note the combination of rings, and the date and location, and contact Phoebe Barnard at [barnard@sanbi.org](mailto:barnard@sanbi.org) or the South African Bird Ringing Unit at [safring@adu.uct.ac.za](mailto:safring@adu.uct.ac.za)

## A bit on the side

Red-knobbed Coots *Fulica cristata* and Common Moorhens *Gallinula chloropus* have a varied diet. The coot eats mainly plant material, but will also take crustaceans, insects, and even cow dung. The diet of the Common Moorhen in South Africa is not very well known, but it appears that it too has an unfussy palate and will consume plant material, insects and tadpoles, and even fish and birds' eggs. Both species are also known to feed on carrion, but I do not know whether this behaviour has been photographed before.

I often spend the early morning in the small portable hides that I set up at strategic places

for bird photography. During a recent visit to a small freshwater dam close to Kimberley's Kamfers Dam, I watched and photographed two Common Moorhens and a Red-knobbed Coot scavenging on a dead juvenile Lesser Flamingo.

During the 2008/09 summer, there was a massive Lesser Flamingo breeding event at Kamfers Dam. We calculate that the number of chicks surpassed the estimated 9 000 produced during the 2007/08 season, and was perhaps in excess of 12 000 chicks. With this number of Lesser Flamingo chicks, there must be daily mortalities.

A pair of African Fish-Eagles that have a nest not far from the dam feed almost exclusively on the flamingos (barring the odd duck which is thrown in for dessert). They probably catch sick, lame and lazy flamingos and doubtless occasionally scavenge on dead ones. I have also watched or seen signs of black-backed jackals, feral dogs, yellow and slender mongooses and Pied Crows feeding on the ready supply of flamingo carrion.

I was, however, surprised to find these moorhens and the coot scavenging on the flamingo



Common Moorhen

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corpse. They were quite nervous and sometimes beat a hasty retreat to a nearby reedbed when I moved my camera and lens, and they seemed perturbed by the sound of my camera shutter. My anthropomorphic conclusion was that they were feeling guilty about this atypical meal.

There are sometimes large numbers of both species at Kamfers Dam, with maximum counts of 1 576 Red-knobbed Coots on 19 July 2000 and 331 Common Moorhens on 16 March 2002. They must be doing a good job of ridding the dam's edge of flamingo carcasses.

MARK D. ANDERSON



Red-knobbed Coot