

# inbox

We'd like to hear from you, and you are welcome to send us your birding questions, observations or sightings for inclusion in these pages. Accompanying images should be sent as high-res jpgs, and be between 1 and 3MB in size. Send your contributions to [editor@birdlife.org.za](mailto:editor@birdlife.org.za). Letters may be edited for clarity or length. The opinions expressed here do not necessarily reflect the policies of BirdLife South Africa.

## CAUSE & EFFECT?

**W**e live in a remote area of Mozambique with very little infrastructure. The birdlife here is amazing, but unfortunately the forests (mostly miombo) around us are disappearing at an alarming rate. As I understand it the avifauna here has not been atlased and I do not think we will ever know what species have occurred. Our house is fenced off from the adjacent protected but very vulnerable forest, which is about two square kilometres in extent. In general, the pristine forests in the region are being cleared for tobacco and small-scale farming and as a result we get a high concentration of birds such as Narina Trogon, Pale-billed Hornbill and Shelley's Sunbird frequenting this local forest. We also have Spotted Eagle-, Barn, African Wood and African Scops owls, as well as Pennant-winged Nightjars.

In 2012 we noticed the first Pied Crow in the village. Recently we saw about six crows in our garden, and we have also noted a decrease in the number of raptors and owls here. Most disturbingly, there was an incident where about five crows attacked a Spotted Eagle-Owl in the garden. They appeared intent on killing the owl and the battle lasted for quite a while. The owl was flailing around the tree in a bid to escape the onslaught, and eventually it flew off with the crows in pursuit.



PIED CROW ALBERT FRONEMAN

It will be a sad day if the crows are the reason for the resident owls and other raptors moving away from the forest. Is there something that we can do to get the crows out of this area and what impact do they have on our raptors and other birdlife? I'm very concerned about this as we have definitely noticed a change, and the attack on the Spotted Eagle-Owl was an indication to me that all is not well.

**LU-ANNE McSWEENEY**  
Chifundi, Mozambique

*Mark Anderson, CEO of BirdLife South Africa, comments:* The world's crows are generally doing pretty well, with increasing ranges and populations, and the southern African crows are no exception. These generalists are able to take advantage of disturbed environments and artificial food sources and nest sites. With fewer competitors, especially raptors, there are more nest sites and there is more food.

The changes are almost certainly caused by humans. Controlling crows is unlikely to be effective as they will quickly be replaced by other individuals, and unless a control campaign is sustained it is destined to fail. Any efforts to control crows also need to be selective, as we cannot afford to have inadvertent mortalities of raptors and other scavenging birds.

My major concern is that killing crows is only going to treat the 'symptoms', when it is the 'cause' that we need to deal with. This includes cleaning up the environment, restoring raptor populations, and maintaining healthy ecological systems.

**M**ark Anderson is to be congratulated for his lucid comments on crows (Nothing to Crow About, November/December 2013). They are arguably the most intelligent family of birds, and they utilise this to their advantage. If anyone doubts their intelligence, I suggest they read *Corvus* by Esther Woolfson.

The birding community is continually being exhorted to take action against these 'nuisance' birds. The Cape Bird Club Conservation Committee has on several occasions been approached to consider 'action' against the Pied Crow. We have reviewed the evidence such as it is and, as Mark so clearly states, there is very little substantial proof.

He has done the birding community a service by using his knowledge and status to bring sanity to bear on this question. Let's hope it has been put to bed until such time as solid evidence one way or the other is published. I would venture that due to the complex nature of the problem this may be a long time hence.

**DAVE WHITELAW**

Cape Bird Club Conservation Committee

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## YOU WIN

**I**n this issue, the winner of the best contribution to our Inbox is **Dave Whitelaw**, who will receive a copy of the new edition of *Birds of the Indian Ocean Islands* by Ian Sinclair and Olivier Langrand, courtesy of Random House Struik.

This new, expanded edition is a comprehensive guide to the birdlife of Madagascar, the Seychelles, the Comoros and the Mascarenes, an area that boasts high levels of endemism. It has been fully updated to reflect taxonomic changes, and now describes and illustrates 502 species.





## CLAY TIME

**W**e live adjacent to a golf course and late one afternoon I noticed a large flock of African Green Pigeons in the trees next to the course. I watched them for a while and, one by one, they descended to a patch of bare earth until there must have been nearly 50 birds jostling with each other to feed on something in that specific area (above).

I couldn't make out what they were feeding on, but it seemed as though they were eating the soil itself. Could they have been attracted by some sort of mineral deposit in the soil? And is it common to see such a large group of these pigeons?

**MARANDA KRUGER**  
Rustenburg, North West

*Professor Andrew McKechnie comments:* Geophagy, as the ingestion of soil is formally known, is a regular behaviour in African birds such as mousebirds, turacos, pigeons and some passerines. The phenomenon is well documented in both African Green and African Olive pigeons, with up to 180 individuals of the latter species recorded feeding on clay at salt springs in KwaZulu-Natal. Outside of Africa, geophagy is perhaps best known from the large flocks of macaws and parrots that frequent clay licks at sites such as Tambopata in Peru.

The behaviour is particularly prevalent in frugivorous birds. One of the main functions seems to be detoxification: ingested clay is known to absorb toxic compounds from partially digested fruit in the digestive tract, thereby reducing the negative effects these chemicals have on the birds.

## WORTH A VISIT

**D**uring the spring holidays we visited Amatikulu Nature Reserve in northern KwaZulu-Natal, where I encountered a few specials such as Crested Guinea-fowl, Olive Woodpecker, Crowned Hornbill, Yellow-rumped Tinkerbird and Black-throated Wattle-eye. On the last day I was lucky enough to accidentally flush a Swamp Nightjar (below), which landed on a rock about two metres from me. I managed to photograph it just before it flew further away into deeper grass, where I left it undisturbed.

All the small Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife reserves in this area are a haven for birds and I can really recommend them to nature lovers.

**LUCA FEUERRIEGEL**  
Deutsche Schule, Pretoria



## OVERNIGHT LEG

**W**e visited the Kgalagadi Transfrontier Park early in October 2013. While on a game drive along the Nossob River bed between the Leeuwdril and Rooiputs waterholes, we came across this Lesser Flamingo (above, right).

We couldn't believe that a flamingo could survive in this environment. Its pink and white coloration was a stark contrast to the drab background. We followed and photographed the bird for about 30 minutes before it flew away. We returned to the area the next day but the flamingo was nowhere to be seen. The Kgalagadi guide book's bird checklist mentions that even once-off sightings of Lesser Flamingo are rare.

**ED AYLMEER, Via e-mail**



*Mark Anderson comments:* It has been shown, including through satellite-tracking work by Graham McCulloch, that Lesser Flamingos are nomadic in southern Africa. They move between the large wetlands where they breed, such as Etosha Pan and Sua Pan (and until recently Kamfers Dam), and other sites, including the Walvis Bay lagoons and Flamingo Pan at Welkom. They commute at night, covering vast distances, perhaps more than 500 kilometres during a single trip.

It has always intrigued me how easily and quickly Lesser and Greater flamingos seem to locate recently inundated ephemeral pans, thus allowing them to exploit the temporarily available food. Occasionally, flamingos probably do get lost and they may not reach a destination, and this is when vagrants such as the Kgalagadi bird are grounded. This is usually just for a day, as the following night they would be winging their way to a more suitable environment. ♦