



PETER RYAN (2)

gender BENDER

Sentinel Rock Thrush

The Sentinel Rock Thrush *Monticola explorator* is one of two rock thrush species endemic to South Africa and Lesotho. Its range is centred in the highland grasslands of the eastern escarpment, but it occurs at low densities along the mountain chain west to Cape Town. A few pairs occur on the Peninsula mountain chain, including a tame pair that has frequented the upper cable station on Table Mountain in recent years.

I have noticed a pair on Muizenberg mountain on and off for the past decade. I don't see them every year, but when I do they are always in the same general area, suggesting that they are resident. In October–November 2008 they were feeding a fledged chick, and this was when I first realised why I only saw males: the female looks like a male.

Like all rock thrushes, Sentinel Rock Thrushes are sexually dimorphic. Males have striking blue-grey and orange plumage, whereas the females are grey-brown above with mottled and streaked underparts that are variably tinged orange on the belly. The female of the Muizenberg pair looks like a slightly scruffy male, especially when in worn plumage during the breeding season.

After the March 2015 fire (see May/June issue), the pair were easy to locate, accompanied by a couple of endearing juveniles. Once again, both adults resembled males, although in May the female was in fresh plumage, showing a brownish tinge to the grey head and upperparts, and extensive pale fringes to the underpart feathers.

In 2008 I assumed that the female was an unusually old bird, as hormonal changes in old individuals can result in females expressing some male plumage traits. But if she was old then, it seems

unlikely that she would still be around almost seven years later. Yet it seems equally odd that her successor would also exhibit male-like plumage. Perhaps she is just an unusual individual. This cautionary tale suggests that we should not simply assume a bird's sex based on its plumage.

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The unusually masculine female Sentinel Rock Thrush in worn (November, top left) and fresh (May, top right) plumage, compared to a typical female (bottom left) and male (bottom right).



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