



lilian's lovebirds

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Lilias lovebirds, *Agapornis* spp., are a uniquely African group of birds. These small, colourful parrots occur in a range of habitats across the continent, from semi-arid thornveld to mopane woodlands and tropical forests. Several species have highly restricted distributions, and understanding the status of populations and the reasons why they occur in some places and not others is vital for their conservation.

Researchers from the Percy FitzPatrick Institute, the World Parrot Trust, the Museums of Malawi and BirdWatch Zambia have initiated a new research programme that aims to unravel some of these mysteries for Lilian's (Nyasa) Lovebird *A. lilianae*. This Near-Threatened species is a narrow-range endemic confined to the Zambezi Basin and is thought to be a habitat specialist as its distribution seems to be strongly tied to mature mopane woodland. Studies conducted by Tiwonge Gawa, in collaboration with the University of KwaZulu-Natal, in Liwonde National

Park, Malawi, identified several roosting sites of Lilian's Lovebirds. All these roosts were in tall, 'cathedral' mopane, suggesting that such stands provide a critical density of nesting holes vital for local populations of the species.

Lilian's Lovebirds drink regularly at waterholes or patches of slow-flowing water at river edges. While changing climates and the spread of agriculture in rural areas may be affecting the seasonal availability of accessible water, another threat looms for lovebirds visiting waterholes. In Liwonde National Park poachers have been found to contaminate waterholes with pesticides. Although this poisoning is targeted at large mammals, the collateral damage to lovebirds and other bird species can be considerable, sometimes killing entire flocks of lovebirds in a single episode.

The population of Lilian's Lovebirds already has been reduced by flooding of a large section of the Zambezi valley to form Lake Kariba and Cahora Bassa Dam.

Lilian's Lovebirds rely on naturally occurring cavities for both breeding and roosting.

The species is considered a pest by small-scale farmers as it sometimes feeds on crops. There is also pressure from the live bird trade. It was listed on Appendix II of CITES in 1981, and more than 10,000 have been captured from the wild and legally exported since 1981.

The combined threats of habitat loss (especially stands of large, mature mopane trees), poisoning of waterholes, persecution and the wild bird trade are sufficient to raise serious concerns for the species' future. If Lilian's Lovebird is to be conserved, we must discover what it needs in order to thrive, define its current distribution and quantify existing and potential threats. Utilising the latest satellite data in combination with field surveys and assessments of mopane woodlands, FitzPatrick researchers plan to compile a detailed needs analysis for Lilian's Lovebird and highlight areas for future research and conservation initiatives.

Birders can help by submitting all their records of Lilian's Lovebird sightings. These need not necessarily be recent, as older records may give a valuable indication of historical changes in distribution. We'd like to know where you saw each group (ideally a GPS location, but a detailed description would still be useful), flock size and a date (similarly, a precise date if possible, but if you don't recall exactly, a month or even just the year would be valuable). Finally, if you remember what they were doing when you saw them, include that information (were they flying, drinking, feeding in a tree, or feeding on the ground?). Send your records to ngewoti@gmail.com and please spread the word about the request for sightings to other birders.

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