



# city slickers

Urban birds in *Ostrich*

influence the feeding efficiency and body mass of city-dwelling Red-winged Starlings. Another, by Anina Coetzee et al. (2021), explores the prevalence, reliability and quality of supplementary feeders in urban areas of the Cape Floristic Region and the extent to which artificial nectar feeders boost the breeding attempts of sunbirds and sugarbirds. This may reveal a conservation value of such subsidised feeding practices beyond the well-studied traditional feeding of birds in winter in the northern hemisphere.

Urban environments have their own effect on disease ecology and the cultural context of an urban centre can determine to what extent there is interaction between wildlife and humans, including their pets and livestock. A paper by Van Niekerk (2021) highlights conservation measures relating to free-ranging chickens, which could harbour contagious diseases and negatively affect Red-necked Spurfowl.

We learn that the 'typical' African urban bird is not only a generalist, but also

a scavenger (Lee et al., 2021). This suggests a unique, continent-wide foraging niche that might contribute to the high raptor diversity in African cities (McPherson et al., 2021).

Studying single and even well-known species is equally worthwhile and can reveal novel insights, as seen in research into the vocal complexity shown by Egyptian Geese (Gridley and Gardiner, 2021). Although the Egyptian Goose is common in much of Africa and its calls are part of the urban soundscape, little is known about the species' repertoire and its behavioural context.

Having wildlife on our doorstep means that city-dwellers can get involved in urban conservation, as several articles in this special issue (Coetzee et al., McPherson et al., 2021) point out. If there is one positive aspect of the global coronavirus crisis, it is perhaps the positive shift in public awareness of nature-related topics.

This issue of *Ostrich* in full can be accessed at [www.tandfonline.com/toc/tost20/92/1](http://www.tandfonline.com/toc/tost20/92/1)

The latest issue of *Ostrich*, guest edited by Petra Sumasgutner, has Africa's urban birds as its theme. Among the papers presented is one that examines species richness and functional diversity in cities in several African countries (Lee et al., 2021); another that surveys urban raptor communities in South Africa (McPherson et al., 2021); and a third that presents a local view of the bird community of Makhanda (formerly Grahamstown; Craig et al., 2021).

A study conducted on the campus of the University of Cape Town (Risi et al., 2021) investigates how changes in the availability of human-associated food



MARK D. ANDERSON

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the Wakkerstroom Centre, as well as Norman Ncube, David Nkosi and Sifiso Magagula.

To book a bird guide or make use of the centre's affordable accommodation options, contact Kristi Garland on 081 726 5282 or [wakkerstroom@birdlife.org.za](mailto:wakkerstroom@birdlife.org.za)

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ANDREW DE BLOCC, AVITOURISM PROJECT MANAGER



# raising rockjumpers

BIRD OF THE YEAR 2021: CAPE ROCKJUMPER

Few birds spend as much time thinking about reproduction as Cape Rockjumpers do. They can begin building their nests as early as mid-July and still be caring for nestlings the following January, so there are only five months a year that they are not actively breeding. Even during the non-breeding months, they may be feeding fledglings or juveniles, which continue to receive the occasional meal for six months after they have left the nest. Both male and female, and sometimes helpers too, take part in all aspects of raising the young.

It all begins with the nest. Although nests may be sited in a variety of locations, they are mostly on the ground and under a rocky overhang. The birds spend only a few hours each day on building the nest, so it takes them several days to complete it before adding the final soft touches, often fluffy protea seeds or the fur of red rock rabbits. The female then lays the two or three eggs and she and her mate take turns to incubate them for about 20 days. Once the chicks hatch, it will be another 20 or so days before they are finally ready to leave the nest. Before committing fully to leaving home, 16-day-old rockjumper nestlings spend a few days 'partially fledging', when they move away from the nest for a few minutes at a time but quickly return so as not to miss a meal.

Being exposed on the ground for 40 days is a dangerous game and, as for many ground-nesting species, the rate of predation on Cape Rockjumper

chicks is high. Baboons, ravens and mongooses are all potential predators in their mountain fynbos home, but when studying the causes of nest predation we were surprised to find that boomslangs accounted for more than half the predation events we identified. Given the lack of real trees in fynbos-covered mountains, these 'tree snakes' are surprisingly common. Unfortunately for the rockjumpers in view of climate change, boomslangs are more likely to prey on their chicks at higher temperatures. Also, the adult birds provision less in hotter weather, which leads to smaller nestlings.

Nevertheless, climate change may benefit the breeding success of rockjumpers by contributing to an increase in veld fires. Our studies have shown that rockjumper nests in recently burnt areas are more likely to successfully fledge young. One possible reason for this is that there are fewer predators in these open landscapes. Another is that the rockjumpers can see predators approaching from far enough away that they can successfully mob them. Once a snake is at a nest it is not affected by mobbing, but if the adult birds start mobbing at some distance from the nest they may be able to 'convince' the snake to head in another direction.

No matter the challenges – predation or freak weather events such as late-season snow – in any given year Cape Rockjumpers will persist with breeding attempts until one, or more,



One of our provisioning cameras caught this image of a boomslang preying upon seven-day-old Cape Rockjumper nestlings.

is successful. We have recorded one unlucky pair making no fewer than five attempts in a single season. Even more impressively, although we'd recorded until then only two eggs per nest, this particular female laid three eggs in all five nests – what a champion!

KRISTA OSWALD AND ALAN LEE



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