

28th Annual Parrot Count- Report on the 2025 Cape Parrot Big Birding Day

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*This report is dedicated to Bill Small (25/07/1924-21/06/2025), a great naturalist, lover of
forests and a stalwart parrot counter.*

The Cape Parrot, *Poicephalus robustus* (Figure 1) (Other names include Woudpapegaai in Afrikaans; Dikgwapa in Sepedi; Hokwe in Tswana; isiKhwenene in Xhosa and Zulu) is endemic to South Africa. Cape Parrots occur in the inland 'mistbelt' forests of the Eastern Cape, KwaZulu-Natal and Limpopo provinces. They are also found in some coastal forests in the Eastern Cape and KwaZulu-Natal. The Cape Parrot is considered a 'flagship' species for protecting the mistbelt forests. To save the parrot, we must conserve its habitat, which will help protect those species that share its forest home.

In 2025, the status of the Cape Parrot was changed in the South African Red Data Book, moving from Endangered to Vulnerable (Brooke and Wimberger, 2025; <https://www.birdlife.org.za/red-list/cape-parrot/>). The reasons were as follows "*The population of the Cape Parrot satisfies the criterion for regionally Vulnerable (VU) based on a small, fragmented population of c. 1500 mature individuals, with inferred future declines. There are fewer than 1000 mature individuals in each subpopulation. Although the population and range for this species are small, the thresholds for Criteria D and B are not met. While census data for this endemic species tentatively indicates that the regional population is stable or even increasing, this species faces numerous threats related to poaching, habitat loss and disease which could meet the 10% thresholds for Criterion C over the next three generations. Furthermore, this species occupies remote mountain areas where accurate monitoring of the breeding population is challenging. While its regional Endangered status is no longer supported, an assessment outcome of Vulnerable considers the risk of future threats* (Brooke and Wimberger, 2025; <https://www.birdlife.org.za/red-list/cape-parrot/>).

Thanks to your contributions, the annual Cape Parrot Big Birding Day (CPBBD) has shown that the population is stable but relatively low. However, the threats facing them continue, which is concerning.

One of the biggest problems is estimating the number of Cape Parrots in the wild, as they move between forests for food and sometimes visit food sources outside of forests, especially pecan nut (*Carya illinoensis*) orchards. The annual Cape Parrot Big Birding Day was initiated in 1998, when volunteers counted the Cape Parrots at sites where they had historically occurred. It is held on a Saturday afternoon and the following Sunday morning. Early May was preferred as there is often less mist in the mornings, and the parrots visit pecan nut orchards, so they are easier to see flying out of the forests or congregated in those orchards. Since they vocalise while flying, it is often easiest to see them flying overhead. The best time to see Cape Parrots is when they congregate around sunrise or when they leave their roost sites to search for food, or late afternoon when they return to roost. Before 2023 and 2024, the counts had been done on the same day across all the localities. However, the weather has been changing over a quarter of a century, with the pecans generally fruiting earlier in the year or being eaten earlier by the parrots.

CPBBD 2025

This year, 2025, was the 28th year of the national CPBBD. Those in KwaZulu-Natal and the Transkei part of the Eastern Cape Province counted the central Cape Parrot subpopulation on the afternoon of the 3rd and morning of 4th May, 2025, where the weather was mixed with some areas clear and others cloudy or windy. Meanwhile, those in the Amatholes (Stutterheim, Hogsback, Fort Beaufort) (southern subpopulation) and Limpopo (northern subpopulation) counted on the 12th and 13th April 2025, again, the weather was mixed. Late returns, and that we scrutinise the data to avoid double-counting, partly delayed the compilation of this report. The weather was generally good across the Cape Parrot's distribution range. Similar to 2024, there had been an extended warm summer and autumn, and some deciduous forest trees (e.g., white stinkwood, *Celtis africana*, and Cape chestnut, *Calodendrum capense*) had not changed colour nor dropped their leaves.

The total count in 2025 was only 1839 Cape Parrots, similar to the 2023 total count of 1952 Cape Parrots counted in the wild, the highest ever in all the years of counting. Again, fewer parrots were counted in the Dargle to Karloof areas in KwaZulu-Natal than historically, which is of concern.

The maximum number of Cape Parrots counted was:

- 729 in the southern Amathole subpopulation,
- 932 in the central subpopulation (263 in Transkei and 669 in southern KwaZulu-Natal),
and

- 178 in the northern subpopulation.

At least 203 people of all ages volunteered in the count. On Saturday afternoon, Cape Parrots were seen at 68% of observer sites, while they were seen at 70% of observer sites on Sunday morning. The 'nil' counts are as valuable as the presence counts, as they help show how Cape Parrots use their naturally fragmented forest habitats in the landscape mosaic. Some observers saw juvenile parrots, and others nesting, which showed there was recruitment.

As in previous years, there were several other important outcomes from the CPBBD. Some incidents of illegal hunting or logging were reported, and people realised how essential forests are. There were observations of samango monkeys (*Cercopithecus mitis*) and southern ground hornbills (*Bucorvus leadbeateri*).



Figure 1. A Cape Parrot nibbling lichen (Photograph© Paul Goslin).



Figure 2. Some of the participants who counted Cape Parrots in the Byrne area, KwaZulu-Natal, but sadly saw none yet again.



Figure 3. Some of the University of KwaZulu-Natal participants who counted Cape Parrots in the iNgeli area near Kokstad, KwaZulu-Natal, before their departure (Photograph© CT Downs).



Figure 4. Some of the participants who counted Cape Parrots in the Gxalingele area near Creighton, KwaZulu-Natal, in 2025.



Figure 5. Some of the youngest participants who counted Cape Parrots in the Bulembu Forest, Alfred Nzo region.



Figure 6. Some of the participants who counted Cape Parrots in the Langeni / Matiwane areas in the Eastern Cape.



Figure 7. Some of the participants in the Amatholes, Eastern Cape.

Acknowledgements

As in past years, numerous public participants and communities were involved in the CPBBD for which we are most grateful. We are most thankful to the various coordinators (Appendix 1) and those volunteers who have participated for many years. The observers in the Langeni / Matiwane areas participated and produced a very detailed summary report for their area, including Esethu Bulwana, Morgan Nyembezi, Philasande Makhuba, Zizipho Siyeka, Alroy Daniels, Bertus Bouwer and Helen Dalton, Indwe Security, Department of Economic Development and Environmental Affairs (DEDEA), and various Eastern Cape Government Departments, and all participants are thanked for their participation and detailed observations. We are also grateful for the contribution of Border Bird Club, DEDEA, Rance Timbers, Merensky, Sappi and Mondi foresters, Indwe Security, the Eastern Cape Parks and Tourism Agency and Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife officials (particularly those from Coleford Nature Reserve and Impendle Nature Reserve), the Cape Parrot Project (Hogsback and Limpopo Province), the Armours, Craig Belbin (Glen Ives Sawmill) and Scouta Shabalala (Indwe Security), who host the University of KwaZulu-Natal students near iNgeli, and Preshnee Singh and Ebrahim Ally, who assisted with logistics. We are also grateful to Adi Badenhorst of Papegaai Wine, the National Research Foundation (Grant 98404), the University of KwaZulu-Natal, Popes Motors (Richmond) and the Ford Wildlife Foundation for their support.

For more information on previous CPBBDs and the Cape Parrot Working Group – see <https://cpwg.ukzn.ac.za/>



Appendix 1. The coordinators of the Cape Parrot Big Birding Day 2025 are thanked for their contributions.

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Ngeli, Mpur/Glengarry	Eebee Ally Preshnee Singh	072 466 5466 076 666 9488	eebee.sa@gmail.com preshnee.singh@gmail.com
Alfred Nzo Region, namely: Ntswa, Gomo, Bulembu, Tonti, Amanzinyama and Xhama Forest	Dean Ricketts	0824325104	Dean.Rickets@deaet.ecape.gov.za ; dricketts@webmail.co.za
Mthatha Langeni / Matiwane Ngcobo	Helen Dalton Bertus Bouwer	082 703 3110; 043 726 0513 (w) 082 856 3982; 043 726 0513 (w)	Helen@starlightsa.com
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