

29th Annual Parrot Count- Report on the 2026 Cape Parrot Big Birding Day

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Often, when chatting with South Africans of all ages about parrots, most know about South American macaws (especially from the movies Rio and Rio 2), Australian cockatoos and budgies, and sometimes an African parrot, the African Grey Parrot. We are amazed at how many do not know that South Africa has its own endemic parrot, the Cape Parrot, *Poicephalus robustus* (Figure 1)(Other names include Woudpapegaai in Afrikaans; Dikgwapa in Sepedi; Hokwe in Tswana; isiKhwenene in Xhosa and Zulu). We generally have to explain that Cape Parrots occur in the inland 'mistbelt' forests of the Eastern Cape, KwaZulu-Natal and Limpopo provinces, and that they are also found in some coastal forests in the Eastern Cape and KwaZulu-Natal. We then explain that the Cape Parrot is considered a 'flagship' species for protecting the mistbelt forests. So, to save the parrot, we must conserve its habitat, which will also help protect the species that share its forest home. The present Cape Parrot population comprises three genetically categorised populations: a southern group in the Amathole Mountains of the southern Eastern Cape; a central group in forests from Encogbo and Mthatha in the Transkei section of the Eastern Cape through to Afromontane forests of the midlands of KwaZulu-Natal; and a disjunct northern group concentrated mainly in the Magoebaskloof (Figure 2, Downs et al. 2025).



Figure 1. Paintings of Cape Parrots on the walls of a bus stop in the village of Creighton, southern KwaZulu-Natal.

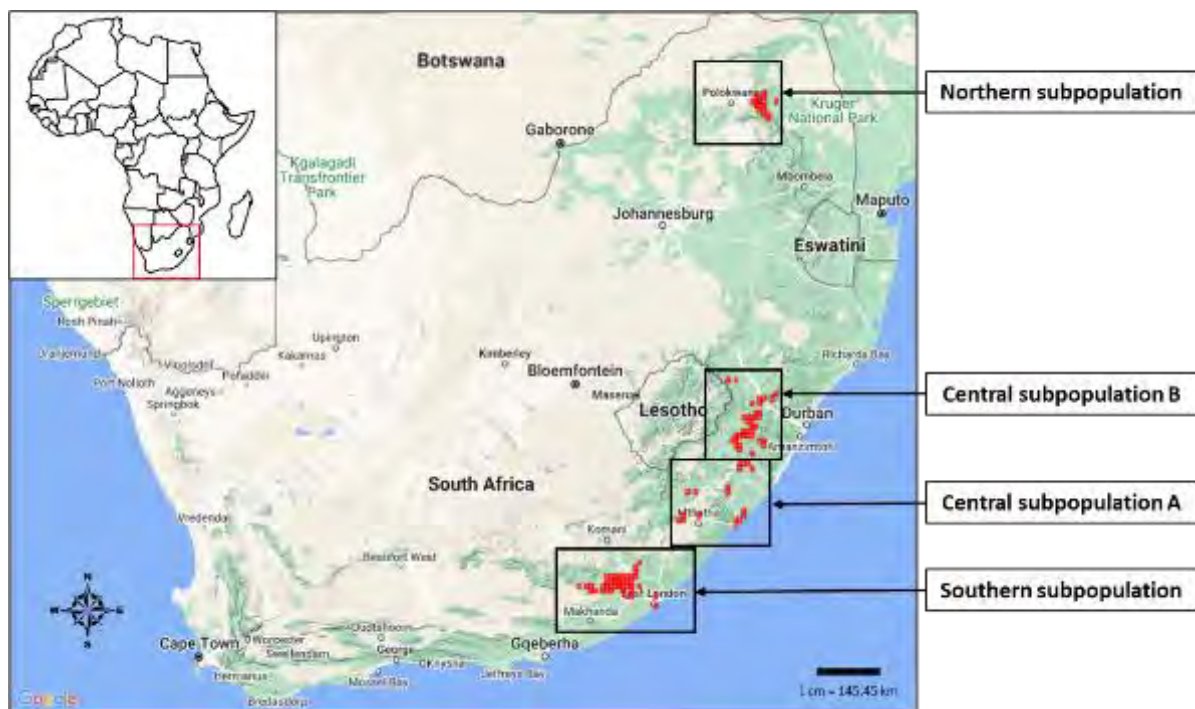


Figure 2. The distribution range of the endemic Cape Parrot in South Africa. (Source: SABAP2 2024, Downs et al. 2025).

With the help of volunteers, 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, making them easier to see flying out of the forests or congregated in those orchards. Since they vocalise while flying, they are often easiest to see overhead. The best times to see Cape Parrots are around sunrise, when they leave their roost sites to search for food, and late afternoon, when they return to roost. Before 2023, the counts were conducted on the same day across all localities. However, the weather has been changing over the past quarter-century, with pecans generally fruiting earlier in the year or being eaten earlier by parrots.

CPBBD 2026

This year, 2026, was the 29th 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 2nd and the morning of the 3rd May, 2026, when the weather was mixed, with some areas beautifully clear and others overcast or windy. Meanwhile, those in the Amatholes (Stutterheim, Hogsback, Fort Beaufort) (southern subpopulation) and Limpopo (northern subpopulation) counted on the 11th and 12th April 2026. Again, the weather was mixed. Late returns and our scrutiny of the data to avoid double-counting partly delayed the compilation of this report. As in the past 2 years, there was an extended warm summer and autumn, and some deciduous forest trees (e.g., white stinkwood, *Celtis africana*, and Cape chestnut, *Calodendrum capense*) did not change colour or drop their leaves until much later than usual. People reported Cape Parrots feeding on green pecans as early as December 2025, highlighting shortages of their food sources, especially forest fruits.

The total count of Cape Parrots in the wild in 2026 was **2165**, the highest in all the years of counting. Previously, the highest total counts were in 2025 (1839 Cape Parrots) and in 2023 (1952 Cape Parrots). What is of concern is that fewer parrots were counted in the Dargle to Karloof areas of KwaZulu-Natal, as well as around Mthatha, than in the past. The highest number was seen in most places on Sunday morning compared with Saturday afternoon.

The maximum number of Cape Parrots counted was:

- 1108 in the southern Amathole subpopulation,
- 854 in the central subpopulation (158 in Transkei and 696 in southern KwaZulu-Natal), and
- 203 in the northern subpopulation.

At least 205 people of all ages volunteered in the count. On Saturday afternoon, Cape Parrots were seen at 70% of observer sites, while they were seen at 76% 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, indicating recruitment.

This year, observers near Creighton saw a female parrot who appeared healthy surviving in the wild with only one 'foot'. Most bird species' 'foot' is actually their toes, as some of the foot bones are fused to form bones of the lower leg, so they walk on their toes. Parrots, some woodpeckers, toucans, and cuckoos have two toes pointing forward and two toes pointing backwards, a trait called zygodactyly, or yoked toe. As birds do not have hands, they no longer have the option of using those limbs to eat, build homes, and care for their young. Many species opted to use their beak for those tasks instead. But some birds also evolved to

be “pedal dexterous”—able to accomplish with their feet tasks that other animals undertake with nimble hands. Parrots are among the most dexterous, with agile, highly manoeuvrable feet. Generally, Cape Parrots use their large, strong bills and feet when feeding (Figure 3). So this female Cape Parrot observed was managing with one foot, which is very interesting and surprising.

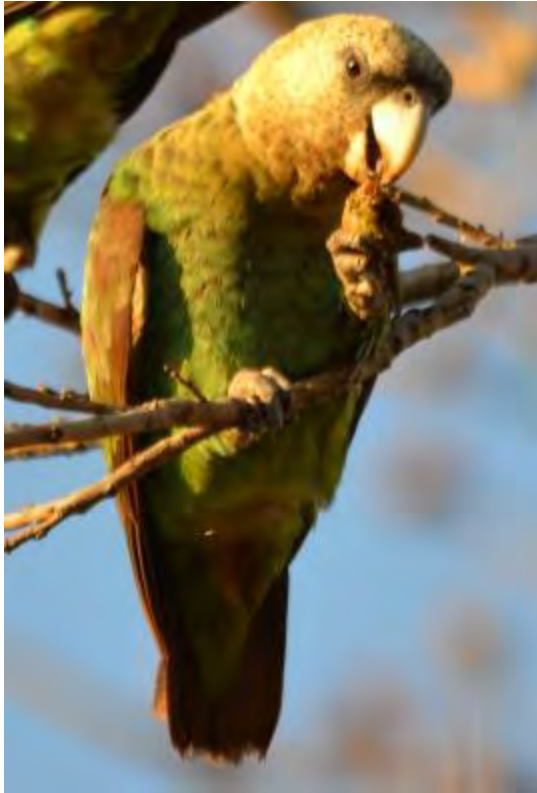


Figure 3. An example of a Cape Parrot using one foot to hold on to a branch and another to hold a pecan while it feeds (Photograph© CT Downs).

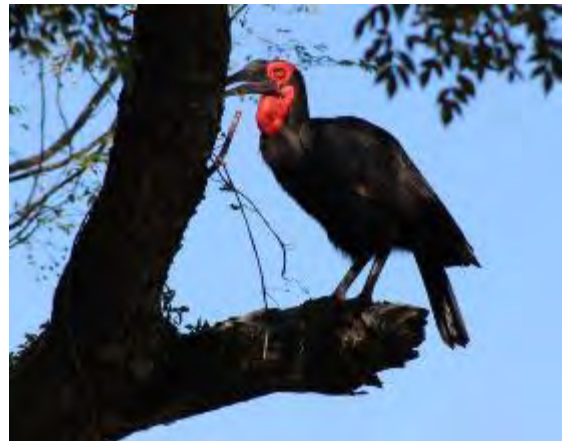


Figure 4. A Southern Ground Hornbill seen near Ingeli, KwaZulu-Natal, on the Cape Parrot Big Birding Day (Photograph© S Stromer).

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 4).

It is often difficult after so many years of CPBBDs (nearly three decades) to have something new to share. So we asked an MSc student, Scarlett Stromer, and a volunteer, Lilith Vergeiner who were participating in their 1st count to share some insights: “As two foreign hobbyist birders from the United States and Austria, we both fell in love with the avian diversity in KwaZulu-Natal upon our arrival in the country. As part of Prof Downs' lab, the Annual Cape Parrot Count was a highlight we would not miss. It brought together many different aspects of birding that we enjoy so much.

We went to iNgeli Forests to look for parrots with other UKZN students and volunteers. Sadly, we did not hear or see the parrots during our Saturday afternoon survey from our allocated observation point. Fortunately, we were assigned to a group led by Joseph Carbutt to observe some pecan trees near the forest on Sunday morning, where parrots had previously been sighted. At twilight, we hiked to our destination and set up with anticipation of seeing and hearing the elusive Cape Parrot. We sat and listened to the forest wake up, with African Wood Owls hooting in the distance. As dawn broke, we suddenly heard the parrots' screeches from above, and eventually eight of them landed in the trees right in front of us, giving us an impeccable view. For the next few hours, we watched in awe as the parrots went straight to work cracking open pecans with their strong beaks.

Actively looking out for birds and listening to their songs makes you realise that there are species all around that we often are blind or deaf to. Sadly, listening and looking for them is also the first step in noticing that some species are declining, mainly because of human activities. Birding has opened a beautiful new world for us and changed our perception of it. Once you start noticing the birds around you, you can't go back! We get teased that we are now 'twitchers, as we keep a list of all the South African bird species we have observed, but it makes our stay here even more special.'



Figure 5. Some of the participants in the Amatholes, Eastern Cape.



Figure 6. 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).

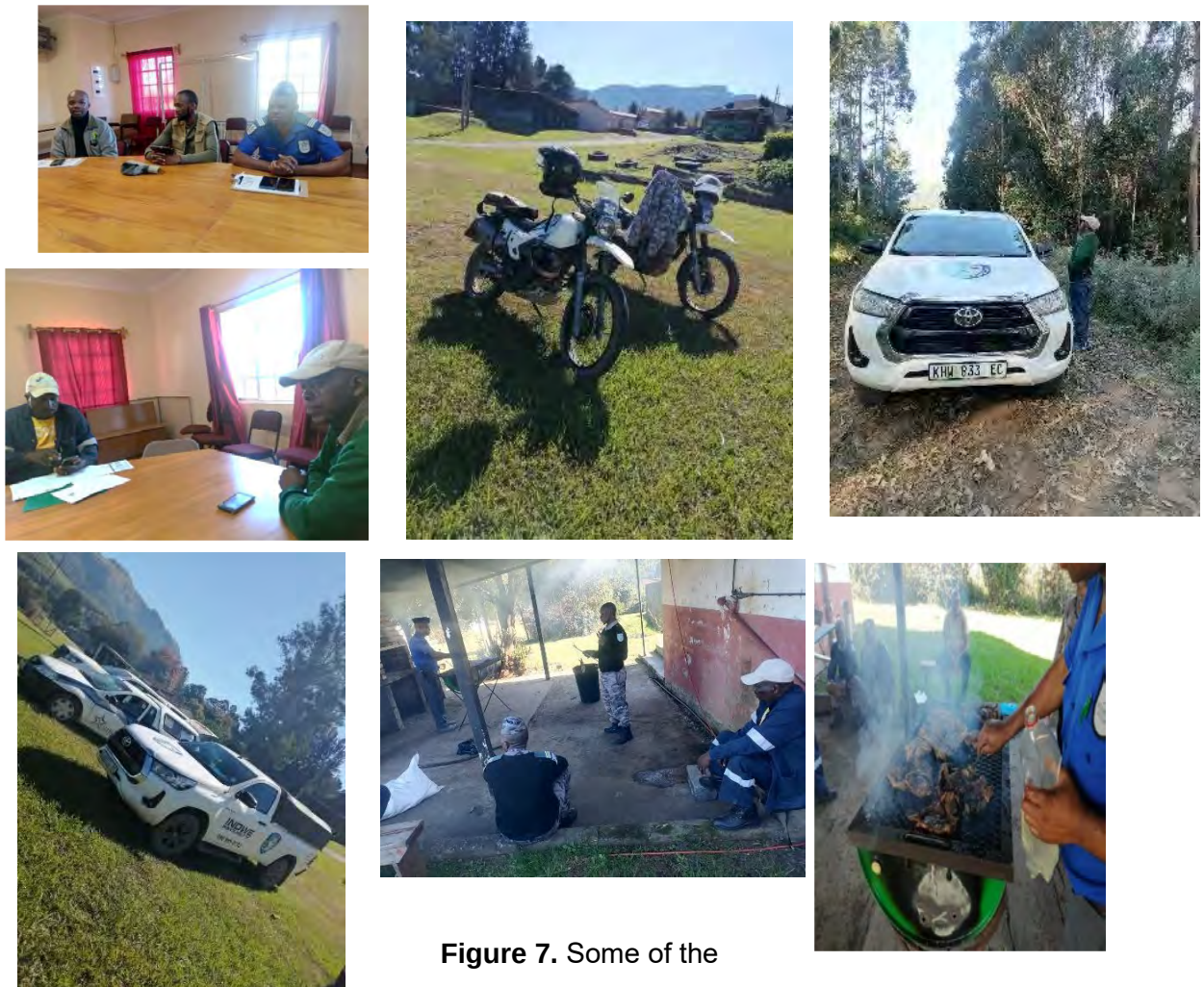


Figure 7. Some of the participants who counted Cape Parrots in the Langeni/Matiwane areas in the Eastern Cape met 1st before going out on the Saturday, then met afterwards for brunch on the Sunday.



Figure 8. Some of the participants who counted Cape Parrots in the Gxalingele area near Creighton, KwaZulu-Natal, in 2026.

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 stalwart 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 Boucher 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). We thank Dr Francis Brook and Daryl van der Merwe of the Cape Parrot Project (Hogsback and Limpopo Province) for all their assistance. We are grateful to Mr Jon Mackenzie and 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.

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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 2026 are thanked for their contributions.

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