

Cape Parrot Newsletter

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The 27th Cape Parrot Count

As always the UKZN student team counted Cape Parrots at the Ingeli and Empasheni forests in KwaZulu-Natal for the annual Cape Parrot Big Birding Day (CPBBD). This year marked the 27th count and many observers across the sites noted that the weather was much warmer than previous years. The weather has changed over the past few years with higher temperatures and more frequent severe events like heavy rain and drought. This can affect the timing of fruiting and that will have an impact on the Cape Parrots movement. Extreme winds can also be an issue as these can blow away and break flowers reducing the amount of fruit available later.

The UKZN student team consists of both undergraduates and postgraduates as well as any other volunteers that are keen to join. Typically, many of the undergraduates have little field experience with this trip being the first time they have camped out. This year there were two main challenges for the team. Firstly, the usual escort to navigate through the plantations was unavailable but they still got to the Emphasheni forest. The second challenge was the death of another vehicle but this time it gave up on the way back from the fieldtrip not too far from home.



The UKZN student team for the CPBBD 2024.

Captive Parrot Pictures



The picture on the left shows a pretty parrot.
This bird was enjoying some mulberries and
looks like it put on some lipstick!

Photo: P Taylor

The Cape Parrot Working Group supports the
captive breeding of registered Cape Parrots.
This acts as an insurance policy for the species
and to offset demand for wild-caught birds.
There is a studbook that aims to provide an
accurate up-to-date overview of all Cape
Parrots kept in captivity and a Cape Parrot DNA
Bank is being established.

The picture on the right shows a
proud parrot parent with her chicks.
The female spends more time in the
nest than the male and nestlings fledge
asynchronously. The chicks are
covered with a sparse white down
which gets thicker as they grow older.

Photo: W Horsfield



The Situation of the Spix's Macaw

Spix's Macaw (*Cyanopsitta spixii*) is a species native to Brazil. It is a medium sized parrot with various shades of blue: a grey-blue head, light blue underparts, and vivid blue upperparts. The pressures of trade and habitat degradation caused this species to be declared extinct in the wild back in 2019. Since then there have been intense conservation efforts to reintroduce the species to its native range. There were unsuccessful conservation projects in the 1990's for the species but these lacked sufficient knowledge about the behavioral and ecological aspects, as well as the necessary resources, thereby resulting in the native extinction.



The species is very rare in captivity and listed in CITES Appendix I, which makes international trade prohibited except for legitimate conservation, scientific or educational purposes. In 2022, there was a release of captive birds bred for reintroduction back into their native habitat. It was an amazing success story as the first 20 individuals established back into the wild with a better than expected survival rate and some having produced chicks since. A population viability analysis was done for the species to model what it would take to grow the population to the point that it can be naturally self sustaining. Basically, it was estimated that at least 20 individuals would need to be released for the next 20 years. There is also a need for extra support to the birds to ensure the population does not revert to its downward trend.

The captive breeding program for this effort has had some changes this year that have caused alarm for conservationists as the schedule of reintroduction, as modelled by the viability analysis, has not been adhered to. The agreement with the Brazilian government and the main breeder in Germany lapsed in June this year so there is a lot of uncertainty surrounding the plans going forward. Many are concerned that this is a political shortfall that will cause setbacks that can inhibit the success seen so far. Any large scale effort like a reintroduction needs a solid plan that can be executed timeously and there was no biological reason for the agreement to end, instead it was an administrative decision.

The start of the Spix's story was promising and gave a lot of conservationists hope but has now been thrown into uncertainty. We must be cautious when administrative processes interfere with conservation efforts like this as they can have severe consequences to outcomes, slow down momentum on initiatives, and waste resources including time.

Cape Parrot Big Birding Day 2024

This year was the 27th year of the national Cape Parrot Big Birding Day (CPBBD). The KwaZulu-Natal and the former Transkei counted the central Cape Parrot subpopulation on the afternoon of the 4th and morning of 5th May 2024. Meanwhile, those in the Amatholes (Stutterheim, Hogsback, Fort Beaufort) (southern subpopulation) and Limpopo (northern subpopulation) counted on 21st and 22nd April 2024. The weather was generally good across the Cape Parrot's distribution range and warmer than in earlier years. The different dates in the count are because of the movement of the birds with the timing of the pecan fruiting.

The total count in 2024 was 1314 Cape Parrots and was likely an undercount as it was substantially lower than the 2023 total count of 1952, which has been the highest count so far. The maximum number of Cape Parrots counted was 565 in the southern Amathole subpopulation, with 406 counted in pecan nut orchards in early April 2024. There were 618 in the central subpopulation (248 in former Transkei and 370 in southern KwaZulu-Natal), and 131 in the northern subpopulation.

On Saturday afternoon for the count in May, Cape Parrots were seen at 67% of observer sites, while they were seen at 66% 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. Juvenile Cape Parrots were observed in some areas and at least three observer sites watched nesting Cape Parrots which showed there was recruitment.

The next Cape Parrot Big Birding Day will be on 3 & 4 May 2025, although the southern and northern subpopulations might be earlier in April depending on the pecan fruiting.



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