

Boom in the Bushveld

NEWSLETTER OF THE MABULA GROUND HORNBILL PROJECT

January 2015

Mabula
Ground
Hornbill
Project



THE GREATEST AWARENESS TOOL: YOUR VOTE



VOTE
FOR
South Africa's
FAVOURITE
BIRD
www.birdlife.org.za/vote

Go to www.birdlife.org.za/vote and scroll past several 'quite nice' birds until you see the Ground-Hornbill and then click on the VOTE tab. If this species can win the competition, the amount of awareness generated for their plight will be enormous. Deadline is 28th February 2015 so do it now! Please get all your friends and family to vote too!!

To see why your vote is so vitally important for the species please read on – it has been a torrid few months for our team and we have never been more aware that increasing awareness about the species, and the myriad threats it faces, is **VITAL** to its survival (and a host of other species that share their territory and the same threats).

HARSH REALITIES OF THE WORLD WE LIVE IN: POISON

Our best release yet - a wild alpha male born, to a hand-reared mother and rehabilitated wild father, as the leader to four of the hand-reared harvest birds – has come to an abrupt end. The female and the youngest male survive but the remaining three birds, including the extremely valuable wild leader, Jac to those who have been following his story, are missing. After six weeks of investigations we have found nothing certain but all signs point to poisoning by a farmer neighbouring the 45 000 ha release site. The five birds were seen repeatedly on the farm for a few days and then suddenly just two...

Every one of these neighbouring farmers assured us in the pre-release awareness campaign that their properties would be safe from the threats we already know of (including the use of aldicarb poison) but after the fact some new 'stories' have emerged. No-one said this would be easy but this has been a real set back for the project. We are grateful for all the help from most of land-owners in the area who assisted with the sighting reports/driving/walking/ helicopter searches for so long, in particular the custodian of the group.

Our biggest job is ensuring that no farmer can again say 'I didn't know'.



THE THREAT OF LEAD AGAIN

Our base release group at Mabula Private Game Reserve was also placed at risk after a home owner shot squirrels with lead shot. The ground-hornbills found the carcasses where they had been thrown over the fence and were observed eating the carcasses. We have been on high alert since, monitoring them through the acute risk period and watching for any visible symptoms once they were into the chronic stages. The youngest bird has been showing some behavioral anomalies which may be attributed to lead and we await the blood result to confirm this. His parasite load was high that may be due to a compromised immune system, and has been treated accordingly. We might have got lucky – the shot may have all passed through the squirrels as they were shot at close range and any fragments may have passed through the bird's digestive systems. Time will tell.

Again – a land-owner who 'didn't know'. This has been a great push for us to increase the awareness on the reserve and we are grateful to the reserve manager for taking such a proactive stance to ensure the reserve remains truly safe for them.

Our publication 'Lead toxicosis in Southern Ground-Hornbills *Bucorvus leadbeateri*: a case from South Africa' has been accepted in the Journal of Avian Medicine and Surgery.

FIRST CONFIRMED NEST IN AN EXOTIC TREE SPECIES

Our work in the Melmoth/Mtonjaneni Distinct has led to a new nest – in a burnt-out gum tree. This is the first record we have of these birds using an exotic tree species for nesting. The rains arrived very late for Melmoth and although the nest was lined and some egg shell fragments found on the ground next to the nest tree, the group appears to have given up for this season. We have been advised that it may be that the school children from the school just down the road may have actively dissuading them from nesting there, by throwing stones as the birds do so much damage to the windows at the school

Again the need for awareness and mitigation.

If you know of these birds nesting in any other exotic species please let us know.



WORKSHOP TO DESIGN A SPECIALISED HAND-REARING CENTRE



The workshop to conceptualise and design the 'perfect' hand-rearing centre at Loskop Dam was a great success. People who have been involved in the harvest and hand-rearing from the earliest days brought their wealth of knowledge and experience, there was provincial support and all the hand-rearers and by the end of the day we had a clear plan. An architect is now working on the concept drawings and then we can start fund-raising to build the centre.

A WOBBLY HARVEST SEASON

This has been a poor season with the hand-rearers only able to pull through six of the eleven harvested chicks. Joanne Meyer at Montecasino Bird Gardens has done an amazing job, rearing not just two of the harvested chicks but an additional four from their captive pairs at the Bird Gardens (and a Northern ground-hornbill for Lory Park Zoo!!). This is a tremendous task and brings the annual tally up to 10 fledglings which is a great batch for the year. This was also a very protracted season with the first chick coming in late October and the last chick harvested just before New Year.



ARTIFICIAL NEST CAVITY EXPERIMENTS UNDERWAY



Our five artificial nest hollow prototypes are up and the experiments are running – testing several types of material for temperature and humidity variables, the effect of aspect, size and placement of air vents/ drainage – and most importantly how much the birds like, dislike or can break them. We know they take readily to wooden log nests well but these have a limited lifespan and so, in order for the nest provision programme to be sustainable, we need to find long-term solutions that will have no negative impacts on the incubating/brooding female nor the embryos and chicks through their various developmental stages.

For a full report of all of our activities for the last six-months feel free to email us: project@ground-hornbill.org.za

Without out the support of all of our sponsors - big and small - we can achieve nothing. Thank you.

