

BOOM IN THE BUSHVELD

Successful Capture of Ground Hornbills

Mabula Ground Hornbill Project (Nick Theron) recently teamed up with the Fitzpatrick Institute (Quentin Hagens) to attempt the capture of Ground Hornbills that occur in the Limpopo River Valley west of Musina. The capture trap was developed by the Fitzpatrick Institute in the Associated Private Nature Reserves (APNR), which borders Kruger. A new prototype that is easily transportable and easy to set up needed to be tested and the groups that occur west of Musina were the perfect candidates. These groups, which occur on privately owned game or cattle ranches, are notoriously shy and extremely difficult to study. The capture operation was critical to enhancing and furthering our understanding of Ground Hornbills outside of protected areas in the Limpopo Province.

The main goals of the capture operation were to test the trap; take blood from individuals for a genetic study, which is being completed at the National Zoological Gardens of Pretoria; and fit individuals from each group with radio transmitters and SAFRING's. All the farmers in the area were contacted before hand and asked to report any sightings. The success of the operation depended on being in the right area at the right time in order to attract them to the trap using call-up tapes played from the vehicle, and model Ground Hornbills set in the trap.

On our first three mornings there was no sign of any birds on any of the farms and our attempts to call birds in were unsuccessful. We later moved to a farm where the birds were recently sighted and on arrival on the farm the local tracker took us to an area where he had seen spoor that was less than two days old. We set up the trap, camped out and were up the next morning well before daybreak to listen for the characteristic booming call of the Ground Hornbill. Before daybreak the birds started their duet. As soon as it was light enough to see we started the call-ups and within five minutes three Ground Hornbills had arrived and were investigating the models in the trap. We waited with bated breath for what seemed an eternity but after approximately 15 minutes two birds entered the trap and we pulled the curtain of the trap shut! We had successfully captured two birds! Blood samples were taken from both and a transmitter fitted onto the female. Later that morning the efficiency of the trap design was proved when a farmer phoned to report 5 birds. We rushed out in the afternoon and set up the trap, caught four of the five birds, took blood samples and fitted a tail mounted transmitter - all within a couple of hours of the farmer reporting the birds.



The successful nature of this capture operation is an example of the collaboration between various institutions working to conserve these magnificent birds and especially the support of local farmers. Because of the size of the area and the low densities of birds nothing could be accomplished without their help and vested interest in conserving this charismatic species on their land.

-Nick Theron
The Mabula Ground Hornbill Project
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One of the local farmers getting

involved