

## **BOOM IN THE BUSHVELD – XENA AND THOR**

UMGENI RIVER BIRD PARK GIVE TWO SOUTHERN GROUND HORNBILL CHICKS TO THE MABULA PROJECT FOR RELEASE INTO THE WILD.

Xena and Thor were bred at Umgeni River Bird Park in the summer of 2005, by Ground Hornbill parents that were harvested and rescued from their nests in the Kruger National Park 10 years ago where, as the smaller second chicks, they would have died of starvation. Last year Umgeni River Bird Park was first Bird Park in South Africa to breed Southern Ground Hornbills successfully in captivity.

Xena and Thor are now at the Mabula Private Game Reserve in the Limpopo Province. Here their hand rearing continues using a cloth 'ghost' to disguise the 'hand rearers'. Hornbill puppets are used to feed the chicks, so as to prevent habituation to people. When they fledge they will join the free-roaming group on Mabula Reserve.

The Mabula group has been 'manufactured' by the Project over the past 6 years, from second chicks harvested from Kruger Park and also a wild adult male, saved by Moholoholo Rehabilitation Centre from a poisoning incident that killed the remainder of his group.

The Project has previously relocated two juvenile birds to Shamwari Game Reserve in the Eastern Cape, in order to start a breeding group in an area where ground hornbills have been declining over the past 50 years. The 'Umgeni' chicks, Xena and Thor, are destined for the same type of release programme in Madikwe Game Reserve.

Ground Hornbills are a flagship species of the Savannah Biome and are in sad decline, having lost 50% of their habitat due to farming and development over the past 50 years. They are suffering as a result of the cutting down essential large trees (for roosting and nesting), indirect poisoning, being shot for window breaking, trade in exotic birds and the muti trade.

Public interest in the Conservation of wildlife is growing and the labour of the Mabula Project to inform and raise this awareness is ongoing. The need to harvest, hand-rear and release second 'doomed' chicks (and more recently captive-bred birds), to augment non-viable wild groups and encourage introduction into 'safe' areas, is of vital importance.

Three cheers to Umgeni for donating their precious chicks for release back into the wild!

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