

The missing rain birds

There may be fewer than 25 Southern Ground Hornbill groups left in northern Zululand and researchers are trying to ascertain whether this correlates with changes in land use

By Tony Carnie



BIRD experts have asked the public to help unravel the puzzle surrounding the alarming disappearance of a big, black, turkey-sized bird from large parts of northern Zululand.

Known in Zulu as *iNgududu* or *iNsingizi*, the Southern Ground Hornbill has a loud, booming territorial call and is also known to attack its reflection in windows and shiny car hubcaps using its large sharp beak.

The male birds have a very distinctive red face and throat pouch.

Throughout South Africa, there are only about 1 500 of these birds left (mainly in the Kruger National Park) but fewer than 400 breeding females to keep the species alive.

Bird fundis Alan Kemp and his daughter, Lucy, have suggested, in a new research paper, that there may be fewer than 25 Southern Ground Hornbill breeding groups left in northern Zululand stretching from Richards Bay to the Mozambique border.

This area was once a stronghold for this long-lived species which is now regarded as critically-endangered.

The birds are vulnerable because they breed co-operatively as a group, with a single alpha male and alpha female.

Although adults can survive to the age of 40 or 50, most family groups only manage to rear a chick into adulthood once every nine years, on average.

In their preliminary research paper, the Kemps have developed the hypothesis that the population collapse may be linked to the move away from cattle to game ranching.

Ironically, while the move to ranching wildlife has benefited



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many animal species, they suggest cattle ranchers used to stock their land more heavily, with the result that the grass layer is now taller and denser on land stocked with wildlife.

Though ground hornbills can fly, these birds spend much time on the ground in grassland hunting for frogs, snakes, lizards, squirrels, hares, beetles and other prey.

The Kemps have circulated their hypothesis to several bird experts in KwaZulu-Natal to test their theory and also to unearth alternative ideas to understand and hopefully reverse the sudden decline of this species over the past 20 years or so.

"We know some of the

places Southern Ground Hornbills used to occur and some of the spots where stragglers are still being seen.

However, we have little or no coverage for many areas, especially those that were within the old KwaZulu homeland, and today are still communal grazing areas.

"Any old or new records of these birds from anywhere in the study area would be welcome, especially from communal grazing areas."

Ideally, they are looking for very detailed information on the sex and age of birds, photographs, moulted feathers and GPS co-ordinates where possible.

While information remain-

ed sketchy, there were indications that these birds had virtually disappeared from the Ithala game reserve and were now less common in Hluhluwe-Imfolozi Park and even the former stronghold of Ndumo game reserve.

Commenting on their preliminary paper, Fitzpatrick Institute bird expert Rob Little suggested more research was needed before concluding the move to game ranching was reducing suitable living space for these birds.

He noted there had been a dramatic increase in human population and settlement patterns in northern Zululand over the past two decades.

While thought to be protect-

ed from persecution in traditional culture, these birds may have become more vulnerable to nest-raiding and dog-hunting in modern times.

Professor Ian Macdonald, a former Natal Parks Board researcher and environmental consultant now living in Bayala, north of Hluhluwe, said he had also noticed ground hornbills had become progressively rarer.

He feared they were headed for local extinction and he had little doubt their disappearance was linked to the massive increase in human population.

It was also probable the birds were being collected for magic/medicinal purposes because of the traditional belief

that ground hornbills were associated with rain.

In the early 1980s he heard reports of chicks being raided from nests in the belief that if they were boiled alive this would alleviate drought.

According to an article published on the Ujwaasi community memory website, the bird is associated in Zulu culture with the power to bring rain. "Zulu hunters respected this bird and will never kill it because it could rain non-stop if it was killed."

Anyone with information on the location of these birds can contact Lucy or Alan Kemp by e-mail on project@groundhornbill.org.za or leadbeater@gmail.com