

View from the Top

Somehow summer always is associated with new hope. And so it is with wonderful avian population! As this is written, gardens and backyards throughout South Africa are experiencing the start of the new breeding season. The obvious joy that these creatures bring is mitigated by the massive losses in chicks and fledglings over the next months.

A friend has monitored the breeding grey hornbills in her garden, and found that they typically predate upon an average of 3 other young chicks per day. The nests are also raided by many other animals, and that discounts the losses after storms and other disasters such as fires. One has to bear in mind that the mortalities are a necessary means for nature to control the numbers of our common birds.

However, the temptation does exist to intervene. As a rule, when the youngsters are found having fallen from the nest, we encourage you to leave them in place. In the majority of cases the parents will continue feeding on the ground. No matter how well your intent, you will never do the feeding as well as those parents. george@naturesheart.co.za.

Birding Plant of the Month

Umbrella Thorn (Vachellia tortilis)

The umbrella thorn is definitely one of the most definitive bushveld trees. The superb canopy shape gives the plant both its' name, and a special appeal. Very often, we choose a "birding tree" based on direct or indirect food production. The tree this month is best known for being a great nesting location, where the thorns provide excellent protection to nests. To punt a different animal though, the sap is the favourite food of bushbabies.

The tree will suit medium sized gardens, and should do well throughout most of the country, except areas of heavy frost. As a caution – it is considered slow growing.

The tree will enhance any indigenous garden, and will definitely encourage breeding birds in your suburb!



Umbrella Thorn Tree

Nature's Heart

Specials of the Month

Introductory Offer!

We are pleased to announce three new products that your birds are sure to love!

This offer is available until 29th October or while stocks last.

1): Peanut Pop R32,00

2): Seed Pop R30,00

3): Peckish Popper R40,00

Bon Mots

"...what we changed was innocence for innocence; we knew not the doctrine of ill-doing, nor dream'd that any did." (William Shakespeare)

Environmental Chirps

Is culling a legitimate mechanism for the control of animal populations? Recently I had the uncomfortable experience of overseeing such an exercise. Let us be clear, culling sits uncomfortably with anyone who loves animals. It sits uncomfortably with me...

The problem that we as humans have is that we are grossly overpopulated. We will reach a number of 8 billion souls in just over a year from now. Approximately 7% of all people who have ever lived are alive today.

Sustaining that many people cannot be done without massive impact on the planet, and upon all the creatures that have been placed under our protection.

The human feeding requirement places extreme strain on both land and sea. About one third of our landmass is allocated to agriculture and cultivation; the area having increased by 1% per year over the last 50 years. This increase is most marked in lesser developed countries. The increase over the last 250 years since the industrial revolution would show an even more stark increase.

The resulting decrease in wilderness areas means that we are no longer able to provide the genuine land expanses needed to sustain a completely "hands-off" self-correcting eco system. The most obviously affected animals are the larger mammals and some bird species. Yet even the insect numbers have been depleted by loss of habitat

and by farming practises that include pesticides.

The result is an imbalance caused either directly or indirectly by human activity. Current theory holds that this imbalance can only be corrected by direct human management and intervention. This is precisely the reason for elephant culling in the Kruger National Park.

For smaller nature reserves the problem is somewhat greater. In our case, we have no lions, and no spotted hyenas. Antelope numbers, and their associated gender distributions rapidly become out of sync. At that point management dictates that we intervene and correct the discrepancies.

In the final analysis (and sadly), culling is very often the most viable solution, and indeed sometimes the only solution.

We can hope for new technologies. An example is birth control for elephants. We can also hope that improvements in drugs and techniques will make it possible for non-veterinarians to perform darting of certain animals for capture and removal. That would substantially reduce cost and make darting more viable to conservancies for smaller animals. Whatever the future, the present dictates a large measure of culling, and it will always sit uncomfortably...

Bird of the Month

Red-crested Korhaan (Lophotis ruficrista)

This korhaan is not a garden bird.

However, it is a common bird with a range throughout most of the north of South Africa. Most wildlife enthusiasts and all bird lovers will doubtless be fully acquainted with the animal.

Whereas the korhaan will eat some fruit and seeds (berries etc.), the main food is from insects found on the ground.

The bird merits the spot as "bird-of-the-month" for many obvious reasons, yet the most special characteristic takes place at mating time (just completed).

The male dive-bombs to attract females. Thus, it seems there are common elements to courtship routines across all species including humans...

