



The Brown-headed Parrot

in South Africa: a Silent Decline

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Just over three years ago, I had never seen a Brown-headed Parrot (*Poicephalus cryptoxanthus*). In fact, I must have skipped the page in the field guide that I was using because I didn't know they existed. But when Professor Mike Perrin of the Research Centre for African Parrot Conservation at the University of Natal asked if I would study them for a Ph.D., I scanned the available ornithological field guides for some background information.

All of the guides featured them as common residents in eastern South Africa and Mozambique. One guide informed me that this species ate fruit, nuts and berries, whilst another described the call as a "typical parrot-like shriek." Apart from that, very little information was given but it seemed easy enough. I was going to study a common parrot, which was partial to muesli (granola in the USA) and sounded like a parrot. All that was required was a comfortable field site where I could study the birds and that is when I began to suspect that the field guides were maybe being slightly economical with the truth. So in the next few pages, I'll review my findings concerning this relatively small parrot, which I believe is in rapid and largely unnoticed decline, especially in South Africa.

Description

An adult Brown-headed Parrot is around 22 to 23 cms in length. The overall colour is green; metallic green on the rump. The green shades into grey on the neck and head becoming brownish on the nape and crown. The species name *cryptoxanthus*, means "hidden yellow" and refers to the bright



Brown-headed Parrot in the wild in a umbrella thorn (Acacia tortillis).

yellow of the underwing coverts. In some individuals this yellow extends to the carpal edge of the wing and is visible in a resting individual. In many cases yellow patches appear on the median and lesser wing coverts and even on the hindneck, making these birds individually distinct.

Range

Historically, Brown-headed Parrots occurred up the eastern seaboard of southern Africa, from northeastern South Africa, which includes KwaZulu Natal, Mpumalanga and Northern Province, through southeastern Zimbabwe and Malawi, the whole of Mozambique, then through eastern Tanzania into southern Kenya. Concomitant with this distribution, three subspecies have been recognized, based on coloration and size, *P. cryptoxanthus cryptoxanthus* in the south, *P. cryptoxanthus tanganyikae* in northern Mozambique, Tanzania and Kenya, and *P. cryptoxanthus zanzibaricus*, which is confined to the islands of Zanzibar and Pemba. However, the existence of the third subspecies is extremely dubious and almost certainly does not exist now, if

it ever did. Here I will concentrate on the situation regarding the nominate race, *P. cryptoxanthus cryptoxanthus*.

Wild Sightings

Environmental conservation in the province of KwaZulu Natal is under the jurisdiction of KwaZulu Natal Conservation (formerly the Natal Parks Board). Within the historical distribution of Brown-headed Parrots, KZNC manages four game reserves. In three of these reserves, Mkuzi (36,000 hectares), Ndumo (10,117 hectares) and Tembe (around 15,000 hectares), the species is listed as "common" in their bird checklist, whereas in Itala (29,653 hectares) it is listed as "occurring." After various visits to these reserves, I informed the head of ornithology, for KZNC that I was suspicious of these listings.

Despite his doubts, Dr. Johnson, instigated an informal census from the respective rangers. The results are interesting. In the last five years Brown-headed Parrots have not been seen in Mkuzi, apart from six birds which were seen for a few days last year (1999). In fact, I spoke to a landowner who lives adjacent to

Mkuzi last week. He reported that although his land includes perfect Brown-headed Parrot habitat, including Sycamore Figs, he has never seen the species in the 10 years he has occupied the land.

A couple of birds were seen at Itala, two years ago but this was the first time the species had ever been seen by the present ranger and they haven't been seen since.

No information was forthcoming for Tembe but in late February, I received an excited E-mail from Ndumo saying that two birds had flown over the northern boundary.

So to sum up, some 10 individuals have been seen in a total of 90,000 hectares of game reserves over the last few years. For reasons that I will explore later, it is extremely unlikely that any individuals occur outside the game reserves.

The situation is much the same in Northern Province and Mpumalanga.

In the south of Mpumalanga, the South African boundary extends eastwards to the Mozambique border. No Brown-headed Parrots seem to occur in this region.

The Kruger National Park (KNP), extends over nearly 2 million hectares and forms a 370 km. long protected area between the two provinces and Mozambique. Only a few reports have reached me of the species being seen on the South African side of the KNP boundary. In the two years that I worked in the KNP I estimate that no more than 2500 Brown-headed Parrots inhabit this region. To put this into some sort of perspective, there are around 2,500 individuals of this "common" species in the wild in South Africa, with by far the vast majority of them in KNP. The same park supports nearly 10,000 of the "endangered" African Elephant and over 2,000 "endangered" White Rhino.

The Decline

A number of reasons have contributed to the decline in Brown-headed Parrots. Before going into these, it is relevant to first address the question of how did this decline happen without anyone noticing. The ranger that I have always worked under in KNP, for a year



Wild Brown-headed Parrot feeding on the large green pods of the paperbark acacia (Acacia sieberiana).

in the north and a year in the south, was Ben Pretorius, a vigorous and committed conservationist. He told me once, after I had unsuccessfully followed his directions to a tree, "sometimes you look but you don't see."

The power of the written word is that birders visiting the national parks of KwaZulu Natal, are informed by the books and guides that Brown-headed Parrots are common. They are seeing the rarities and aren't too troubled to have looked for and missed a common species. It was only when I started to disbelieve the listings that the questions arose. I can't take credit for this because I was clutching my books and guides and only wanted to know where they were common.

The reasons for their decline in South Africa are almost a cliché, habitat fragmentation, habitat destruction, and trapping. The five game reserves in South Africa I have mentioned are islands separated by seas of urban areas and agricultural lands. Brown-headed Parrots are specifically an arboreal species, that is they require trees for food and trees, especially old or dead trees, for nesting. In rural, poor com-

munities such trees are cut up for firewood. Usually this is the only source of heat and excess wood is made into charcoal and sold. In such a poverty driven society, a few dollars can mean the difference between having a meal and going hungry for a week.

In April 1998, I had reports that Brown-headed Parrots were common in southern Mozambique and that some trade existed in them, so I hitched up my caravan. Mozambique is one of the poorest countries on earth, yet my first visit to the capital, started out as a surprise. Although I have never seen it, Maputo from the south side of Maputo Bay, looks like Manhattan and there the difference, hopefully, ends. The first thing that I was offered was a dead domestic cat, which I was assured, was fresh. I declined and took my project proposal to the headquarters of a conservation agency. A man skipped through it, without reading it. When he came to the part that said that I hoped to catch parrots and ring them, he became animated. He asked me how many I thought I would catch and could he have six. When I told him that he

could not have any as they would all be set free immediately, he returned to his bored state. He finally agreed to put the project proposal on file. I never heard from him again.

The Maputo Central market deals in everything, including Brown-headed Parrots. In cages 50 cm high and 30 cm in diameter, you can find up to five parrots, sitting one on top of the other. Many of the them have open head wounds from the pecking of birds sitting on top of them. The vendors will take great delight in vigorously shaking the cage to show that the birds are still alive. This, of course, causes a huge amount of distress to the parrots. There is no food provided in any of these cages and water is available from a cut beer can. The price for one bird is around \$7 US dollars. This is very expensive for a Mozambiquan. Three questions presented themselves; who bought them; how were they caught, and where did they come from?

The main trade would seem to be from South African tourists who probably buy them out of sympathy. The birds are in poor health, which may be deliberate, and smuggled back into South Africa. Even if the buyer was an experienced aviculturalist, the bird would probably not survive, yet the buyer feels that they have done the right thing.

A Mozambiquan student was subsequently hired and the other questions were quickly answered. Bird lime is the sap of a plant, which when chewed becomes more and more sticky. The lime is then spread onto a branch where parrots roost. As the feet stick the bird begins to flap its wings, which also get stuck. The birds can then be plucked from the branches. This also explained why many of the birds offered for sale are missing one or more toes, which are probably hacked off to speed up the harvesting.

The trappers are usually kids and the birds are held in cages until someone arrives to buy the whole consignment. These consignments are then transported to the capital for sale, however, some are kept back and sold locally at the roadside. We contacted two "bird collectors," who both quoted prices for a number of parrot species,

especially African species. Both were asked where the Brown-headed Parrots came from. In each case they said that they came from north of the Limpopo river, as all the birds from south of there had been caught.

From monthly estimates, I have calculated that somewhere in the region of 200 Brown-headed Parrots are offered for sale at any one time in various markets in Maputo and at roadsides along the coast. Judging from the sales in Maputo Central Market, the vendor's turn over their stock in two to four weeks, either in sales or deaths. This amounts to sales of between 2600 and 5200 birds per year. This takes no account of the hidden costs to the population.

In a future article, I shall show that, contrary to published literature, a long-term pair bond forms between Brown-headed Parrots. After hatching, both parents attend the chicks. A parent will not enter the nest if the other parent is missing. Therefore the capture of one parent, not only results in one individual being lost to the population but the loss of the chicks as well. This trade goes on despite the fact that Mozambique, is a signatory of CITES which prohibits the sale of Brown-headed Parrots except under license.

A couple of years ago, I was aware of a license to export 200 birds. The license was granted by IUCN. In 1997, I asked a Mozambiquan governmental official, why, three kilometers from his office, parrots were being sold illegally. Vaguely he replied that the people are poor. He was unable to tell me the relationship between poverty and cruelty.

Conclusion


Last year, a bird atlas for the area south of Save River in Mozambique was published which estimated the population of Brown-headed Parrots in the region as 20,000 and described the species as "common." I have no doubt that the author is correct at the moment, however, equally I have no doubt that he won't be correct in a few years time.

The bird list for Mkuzi Game Reserve is compiled from records dating back 25 years and from Itala Game Reserve 10 years. The Mozambique atlas is compiled from data collected between 1990 and 1998.

There are virtually no individuals left in the protected areas in South Africa. Twenty thousand individuals in the wild in Mozambique, with no protection, will only satisfy the market trade for four to eight years at the most.

Unless local, national and international communities take notice of the plight of this species the silent decline will continue.

Stuart Taylor graduated with honours from Edinburgh University, Scotland in Ecological Science. In 1994, he attended the University of Natal, Pietermaritzburg, South Africa, where he gained a Master's degree (cum laude) by researching the control of small mammals as pests in commercial forestry. In 1996, he began work for a PhD, researching Brown-headed Parrots in South Africa.

He would like to express his gratitude to Laurella Desborough for her help in the writing of these articles. 

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