



# Circus



## Newsletter of the Black Harrier Project

July 2004

The Black Harrier Project (BHP) forms part of the Western Cape Raptor Research Programme, based at the FitzPatrick Institute of African Ornithology, University of Cape Town. The key members of the BHP team are Andrew Jenkins (manager), Odette Curtis (assistant manager and MSc student), and Rob Simmons (harrier guru and scientific advisor). The project began in 2000 as a study of the biology of this little-known, rare and endemic species, and was largely funded by the Cape Bird Club and the Fitztitute. It has since grown into a broader-based assessment of (i) the conservation needs of the Black Harrier, (ii) the utility of the harrier as a flagship for conservation efforts in the Fynbos biome, and (iii) the ecological link between harriers and threatened lowland fynbos and renosterveld habitats. The BHP is part of the C.A.P.E. initiative and is funded by the Critical Ecosystem Partnership Fund. The project places heavy emphasis on the involvement of landowners, conservators and nature lovers in the study and conservation of Black Harriers and their habitats. This is the first issue of *Circus*, the project newsletter, which will be produced twice-yearly and distributed to everyone involved with or interested in the project. *Circus* is the scientific name given to the group (or genus) of harrier species.

### The early days...

To bring you up to speed with the initial stages of the project, we suggest that you read at least one of the following publications:

Curtis, O, Simmons RE & Jenkins, AR In press. Black Harrier *Circus maurus* of the Fynbos Biome, South Africa: a threatened specialist or an adaptable survivor? *Bird Conservation International*.

Curtis, O, Jenkins, A & Simmons, R 2001. The Black Harrier: work in progress. *Africa – Birds & Birding* 7: 30-36.

Simmons, RE, Curtis, O & Jenkins AR 1998. Black Harrier conservation and ecology: preliminary findings 2000. *Journal of African Raptor Biology* 13: 33-38.

If you are unable to source copies of these articles, please contact the BHP team and we will send them to you. Note that the *Birds & Birding* article is available in pdf format on the research programme website:

<http://web.uct.ac.za/depts/fitzpatrick/docs/raptor.html>

### Progress and events in 2003/2004

This was the first year of CEPF funding for the project, which required us to expand our research horizons somewhat, and contextualize our harrier interests into the broader conservation issues of the Cape Floral Region (CFR). The ultimate objective or purpose of the 'new' BHP is scripted

in our funding proposal as ‘... to improve the conservation status of the Black Harrier and threatened lowland habitats by raising general awareness of key environmental issues in the CFR, generating real understanding of these issues through scientific research, and building capacity to sustain this initiative by formal education, and by involving and informing relevant elements of civil society.’

To this end, during the course of 2003/2004 we started to shift our emphasis from harriers alone to harriers and habitats, and started to share our new-found ideas about Black Harriers and their role in the Fynbos environment with other biologists and conservationists, farmers, nature conservancies and the general public. Our awareness campaign included the development of a BHP pamphlet promoting the harrier as an icon of Cape Conservation, landing a slot on the SABC TV nature series 50/50, writing a number of short articles in national and local print media (including *Farmers’ Weekly*), giving talks on the project to a variety of conservancy groups, bird clubs and scientific gatherings (including the *Fynbos Forum*). We also forged productive links with many of the landowners and nature conservators on whose land we worked, and encouraged their involvement in the project, in whatever capacity.



While developing this outreach programme, we also expanded the formal research component of the project. Odette Curtis started collecting data for her MSc project, which will look specifically at the association between harriers and lowland habitats. In 2003 she searched for breeding or foraging harriers in about 50 fragments of lowland fynbos or renosterveld, mostly in the Overberg region, but found only two nest sites in these remnant patches, both of which were located in relatively large, pristine fragments. These preliminary results are particularly important because they show that harriers can and do breed in healthy renosterveld, but have probably been very hard hit by the extensive modification or degradation of this habitat by the spread of agriculture. Odette also made a concerted effort to study harrier foraging ecology using radio telemetry, with limited success. She plans successful studies for this year. Zoology Honours student Kath Potgieter was seconded to the project to study the effects of habitat transformation on the harriers' rodent prey base. She found that infestation by alien vegetation and heavy grazing both have a detrimental impact on small mammal diversity and abundance.

We also continued our annual nest survey and monitoring efforts in 2003. Overall, this was a relatively poor year for breeding harriers, with fewer breeding pairs in our focal study areas and lower breeding success throughout. For example, only 6 of 11 nests in the West Coast

National Park were active, and some failed - unusual for this, the richest and most productive of our study sites. One highlight of the field season was our first confirmed record of Black Harrier breeding on the Cape Peninsula – Rob Simmons located a nest with eggs in the southern section of the Table Mountain National Park.

#### **Breeding season summary: 2003**

The 2003 Black Harrier season was good for the Black Harrier team but less successful for the harriers themselves. We established new contacts across the Overberg, the West Coast NP, and Bontebok NP, initiated our radio-tracking study and assessed the status of harriers in remaining renosterveld patches.

The harriers were less successful apparently because of a cold, dry spring which set back their breeding and prevented most birds in the northern regions from breeding. While 51 nests were active in the 2002 season only 14 of 68 sites were active in 2003. None were found in traditional sites such as Namaqua NP or Niewouldtville (where flowers were also lacking). Those that laid eggs did so mainly in September - very late compared with 2002, when a third of the birds had begun by July - a full 2 months earlier. The number of eggs laid was also lower at 3.2 per nest (vs. 3.4 last year). Fledging success - the number of young per active nest - was also reduced to 2.4 young/nest, down from 2.7 last year. Seventeen percent of eggs laid failed to hatch. If rains and temperature allow we expect the upcoming (2004) season to be much more productive, with more nests and a greater number of young fledged.

#### **Highlights of the 2003/2004 harrier season**

- First record of harriers breeding in unprotected lowland renosterveld
- First record of harriers breeding on the Cape Peninsula
- Confirmation that breeding in Namaqualand is heavily dependent on rainfall



#### **Schedule for 2004/2005**

We are now approaching the 2004 harrier breeding season, and we have a number of work schedules in place that we hope will bring us closer to achieving our objectives. Odette will continue with both her lowland fragment surveys and her radio telemetry work. We have also selected a sample of large lowland habitat fragments, and will search for harriers in each of these, and in all the significant areas of conserved lowland habitats across the entire CFR. In this way we can examine the possibility that harriers are confined to only the larger, more ecologically intact fragments of renosterveld or lowland fynbos.

This year, in the interests of efficiency, we will split the study area between the three principal team members - Rob will do all the survey and monitoring work, as well as the extension work and talks, in the Swartland region (essentially from Malmesbury northwards, including study

areas in the Bokkeveld and Namaqualand), Andrew will cover the central region (south and east of Malmesbury to Gansbaai), and Odette will work in the Overberg region (east of Gansbaai). As well as continuing to publicise the project, we will also be trying to build capacity within each of our designated regions, particularly by refining the survey and monitoring skills of landowners and nature conservators, so that they can take over these roles in their respective areas in 2005. In this way we hope to build a network of harrier monitors across the CFR by the completion of the project.

### **Where do you come in?**

We have enclosed a BHP pamphlet and a questionnaire with this newsletter. Please contact us if you would like more pamphlets to distribute. Please complete the questionnaire if you would like to participate in the project in any way at all, even if it's only to distribute pamphlets or otherwise spread the word to other members of your community.

**We'd like to thank the following people for their contributions to the BHP in 2003:** Andre Beukes (Rondeberg), Dan & Graham Bull, Guy Brooke-Summer, Godfrey Coetzee, Michael Daiber, Mick & June D'alton, Carrots Doyle, Thys De Villiers, Mark Duckitt, Mike Ford (Hermanus Bird Club), Gert Greeff (Koeberg Nature Reserve), Mike Gregor (Elandsberg), Nelly Grootendorst & Paul Gratton (Bontebok NP), Martin Halvorsen, Roelof Jalving, Nikki Hess (De Mond Nature Reserve), Binks Mackenzie & Janice Maltby (honorary rangers WCNP), Chris & Judy New, Matthew Norval, Danie Pretorius (Jakkalsfontein Private Nature Reserve), Wessels Pretorius (Niewouldtville), Koos Steenkamp & Nicolaas Hannekom (Riverlands Nature Reserve), Wessel Wessels, and Andre Roussow (Namaqua NP), Neil MacGregor, Wilhem van Wyk and Kate Webster (E Cape) as well as all the landowners whose land we surveyed on. We hope that you will all continue your involvement in the project in 2004 and beyond. For permits to access protected areas we thank Dr Rod Randall, and H. Buizendenhout (SANParks), Gary de Kock (WCNP), and the Western Cape Nature Conservation Board.

Should you have any further queries about any aspect of this project, or any suggestions, please contact us at the following e-mail addresses or phone numbers:

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