

Do you know of a Secretarybird nest? by Ernst Retief.



Photo taken by a camera trap donated by a land owner to BirdLife South Africa.

The Secretarybird is one of South Africa's most attractive and well known birds. Their characteristic crest feathers, black leg pipes and behaviour of striding through the veld, as they search for insects, small mammals and snakes, makes them very easy to identify. During the last few years, these charismatic birds have unfortunately become less easy to find. It has been suggested that their numbers have declined considerably, not only in South Africa but also across their range elsewhere in Africa. This situation is of great concern to BirdLife South Africa, and a research project has therefore been initiated to determine why their numbers are declining.

Possible Reasons for decline

· Habitat fragmentation and degradation through the spread of agricultural development and commercial forestry;

- Collisions with power lines;
- Collision with farm fences;
- Killed by cars;
- Excessive burning of grasslands may suppress populations of their prey;
- Intensive grazing by livestock can lead to veld degradation;
- Disturbance by humans is likely to negatively affect breeding;
- Secondary poisoning;
- Capture and trade of small numbers of birds.

The aims of the BirdLife South Africa research project are to determine:

- The size of the area used by Secretarybirds for feeding,
- The type of habitat used by the birds; for example, pristine or degraded grasslands, agricultural lands or a combination of these habitat types,

- How long immature Secretarybirds stay at the nest and where they move to when they leave the nest area.

BirdLife South Africa has already fitted three Secretarybird chicks with GPS satellite tracking devices and subsequently obtained very useful information about these birds' movements. The first bird in the Free State moved about 100 km in an easterly direction after leaving the nest. The second bird moved from Bela Bela to Botswana, a distance of about 270 km. The third bird moved from Warden in the Free State to the KwaZulu-Natal south coast before moving inland to Ixopo.

For more information about these birds' movements and other aspects of the project, see the BirdLife South Africa Facebook Page and website <http://www.birdlife.org.za/conservation/threatened-species/secretarybird>

BirdLife South Africa would like to fit tracking devices to more Secretarybirds. For this, BirdLife South Africa needs the assistance of all birders and land owners. Please be on the lookout for Secretarybird nests. Secretarybirds usually nest on Black Thorn, Umbrella Thorn, Sweet Thorn, Common Hook Thorn trees, but also sometimes use alien trees. Trees up to a height of 5 m are used for nesting. The best way to find a nest is to look out for adult birds standing on the nest tree and then to investigate closer.

If you find a nest, please contact Ernst Retief at ernst.retief@birdlife.org.za or 072 223 2160.

BirdLife South Africa would also like to learn about Secretarybird mortalities, especially so that the human-caused mortalities can be addressed.

This project will make a considerable contribution to our knowledge of Secretarybirds and thus assist with their conservation, and you can contribute to the conservation of this charismatic bird species.

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