

Conservation Corner: November 2023

By Jane Doherty

Many of you may know the Spotted Eagle Owls that breed in an owl box in Keurboom Park: watching the chicks mature has become an annual attraction. This year the female laid in early August, but towards the end of September she abandoned the nest. There was speculation that her chicks may have been predated, but there was also some uncertainty as to whether chicks had been spotted at all. The incubation for this species is around a month, so the chicks should have been around 3 weeks old at the time.

Justine Thornton of The Friends asked Kyle Walker to check inside the owl box. Kyle is currently a Master's student at The FitzPatrick Institute of African Ornithology but had previously worked on the Black Sparrowhawk Project, where his tree-climbing skills were in great demand. Dieter Oschadleus and I watched the process he follows to get safely up to a nest.



Photo: Jane Doherty



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Kyle first threw a sinker attached to fishing line over his chosen branch. He then used the fishing line to pull a thin, interim rope over the branch, followed by a thicker, final rope. Securing one end of the rope to the base of the tree, he attached the other to his harness and hoisted himself up.



Photo: Jane Doherty



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Kyle discovered one egg in the box. Giving it a shake, he could feel that there was liquid inside, meaning that an embryo had not developed. There were no broken eggshells, nor signs of prey remains, in the box or below the tree. It was therefore impossible to confirm whether there had been other eggs or chicks.

While it is disappointing not to be able to watch chicks develop and fledge this year, failed nests can be a normal occurrence. It will be interesting to see whether this pair of owls decides to breed again.



Photo: Kyle Walker

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<https://www.capebirdclub.org.za/conservation-corner/>