

Conservation Corner: January 2024

By Jane Doherty

November is a busy time for Red-winged Starlings on the UCT campus as their nestlings require a steady stream of food.

Staff and students at the FitzPatrick Institute of African Ornithology are kept equally busy by a research project that requires regular checking of starling nests and measuring of the chicks at the ages of 7 and 17 days.

Red-winged Starlings nest on cliffs in the wild so, at UCT, they like to find out-of-the-way nooks in high places. This means that the research team is often seen tramping around campus with a long ladder and hard hats, cordoning off the ladder in awkward spots with security tape.



A nestling in its nest.
Photo: Sally Hofmeyr



Bird ringer, Dr Sally Hofmeyr, wears a safety harness when collecting nestlings from nests
Photo: Jane Doherty



Dr Celiwe Ngcamphalala, one of the project's principal investigators, collects blood and faecal samples from each nestling.
Photo: Jane Doherty



A 17-day old chick after measurements and ringing have been completed.

Photo: Jane Doherty

The project has been running since 2017 and examines how this bird species adapts to urban living, making use of opportunities such as food scraps left over by people and dealing with the stress of human presence. Over 500 adults and nestlings have been ringed over the course of the project. The project also provides an opportunity for people on campus to observe ornithological research first-hand. Researchers discuss ornithology with interested passers-by and give them opportunity to become involved in the project. By this means the project can open people's eyes to nature, birding and conservation.

The Red-winged Starling Project has ethical approval from UCT and a permit from Cape Nature, and the researchers follow practices that minimise the stress experienced by the birds.

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A chick from a different nest but of a similar age which has failed to thrive. The reasons may be complex, but it could be simply that the parents struggled to find enough food to sustain their chicks (this chick is one of three).

Photo: Jane Doherty

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