



islands in the sky

PETER RYAN

BIRD OF THE YEAR 2021: CAPE ROCKJUMPER

You're navigating the switchbacks out of the canyon-like valleys of the central Cape Fold ranges, ascending from the Succulent Karoo up aloe- and spekboom-covered slopes when suddenly, in the blink of an eye, you realise that proteas and their allies now dominate the landscape. You continue uphill and for every 100 metres you climb, the temperature drops a degree. Sweat is cooling on sunburnt skin and, as the sun dips below the horizon, your fleece and beanie come out, no matter the season.

In that blink of an eye you'll have crossed an invisible line that marks where a combination of cooler weather and higher precipitation in the form of mountain mist leads to the soil retaining just a little more moisture. Spekboom and aloes give way to honeybushes, cone bushes, proteas and ericas.

The next day, if you're lucky, you'll wake up to a tranquil dawn, with clear skies above and mist filling the valleys flanked by craggy peaks. As the mist disperses it reveals an open Karoo plain, like a sea, stretching to the next

mountain range, another sky island in this terrestrial sanctuary.

Here in the fynbos, the calls of lowland Large-billed Larks have been replaced by those of Victorin's Warblers in the valleys and the duets of Cape Rockjumpers on the upper slopes. There are other birds up here that are more difficult to find on the warmer slopes below: you'll not wait long to hear Ground Woodpeckers or Sentinel Rock Thrushes. These are mountain-loving birds that, like the Cape Rockjumper, prefer to keep things chilled and they cast a wary eye at the invisible, climate change-driven heat haze that is creeping ever higher. Their only escape is to continue upward, but some are already reaching the peak; they're running out of space.

Climate change is causing the habitat of mountain species to shrink as warmer temperatures drive vegetation of the lower slopes further uphill. Some birds can move to higher latitudes, but this is not an option for fynbos specialists like the Cape Rockjumper: heading south would take them over the open ocean.

Across southern Africa there are more examples of high-altitude grassland

species that are similarly restricted: Mountain and Yellow-breasted pipits, Gurney's Sugarbird, Drakensberg Rockjumper and Drakensberg Siskin. The Mountain Wheatear is still widespread, but experts predict it will retreat to mountain strongholds within its range. The vanishing of the climate islands of habitat specialists like Rudd's and Botha's larks and Blue Swallow – species already threatened – has us looking for anything that resembles a lifeboat. Conservationists are rushing to mitigate the damage, instigating measures to protect existing habitat, as if placing sandbags against a rising tide. We can only hope the mountain island specialists have enough flexibility to cope with a dramatically changing world.

KRISTA OSWALD



cultural identities

THE NAMING OF ZULU BIRDS

Carl Linnaeus, when writing about naming plants and animals in the 18th century, said that names 'are the first letters of all knowledge and they should be learned by naturalists because without them nothing can be learned'. In today's terms, if you can't communicate by means of a unique name for an individual species – a name that is known and understood by all who hear it – you can't direct conservation efforts, record vital species information or include local communities in conservation initiatives. This is especially important in South Africa with its diversity of languages, cultural groups and terrestrial and marine biodiversity.

The need for books about Zulu bird names became apparent at National Research Foundation-funded workshops that were held in KwaZulu-Natal between 2013 and 2018 and attended by 18 local bird guides who had been trained by BirdLife South Africa. The contribution of these experts, with their knowledge of both the Zulu language and the province's birds, was the determining factor in establishing the names of all 550 KwaZulu-Natal bird species. These guides regularly take groups of Zulu schoolchildren and their teachers into the field to show them birds and threats to the natural environment. However, until now they lacked the necessary mother-tongue language resources that are essential for instilling and sustaining these learners' interest in birds.

On 27 October 2020, at a function in Mount Edgecombe, two books resulting from six workshops were launched. *The Birds of KwaZulu-Natal and their Zulu Names* and *Amagama Ezinyoni-Zulu Names of Birds* are now available, enabling bird guides to communicate fully in their home language and create awareness of and appreciation – and hopefully protection – for the region's rich birdlife.



The Birds of KwaZulu-Natal and their Zulu Names, by Adrian Koopman, Roger Porter and Noleen Turner, is a photographically illustrated field guide with distribution maps and sections on threatened birds and BirdLife South Africa's Important Bird and Biodiversity Areas. Published by the John Voelcker Bird Book Fund and endorsed by BirdLife South Africa, with a foreword by CEO Mark D. Anderson, it is aimed at learners, birders, bird guides and nature conservation personnel working in the province. *Amagama Ezinyoni-Zulu Names of Birds*, by the same three authors and published by the UKZN Press, takes a more scholarly approach and describes how the names came into being and their underlying meaning. All previous names no longer in use are recorded so the book is also a historical repository, with a total of 671 names for 550 KwaZulu-Natal bird species.

The John Voelcker Bird Book Fund donated 18 copies of *The Birds of KwaZulu-Natal* for the bird guides, but because of Covid-19 restrictions only two guides were able to attend the launch and be presented with their books. Bhikizenzo Ngubane and Thabile Khuzwayo were very happy to finally see the fruits of their participation in the process that started in 2013.



CREDITS

above Umagumejana, the Zulu name for Pink-throated Twinspot, means 'young Gumedede girl renowned for decorative beadwork'.

above, left Professional bird guides Bhikizenzo Ngubane (left) and Thabile Khuzwayo spoke at the book launch.

Addressing the attendees, Thabile said, 'Being one of the few black female bird guides in KwaZulu-Natal, I am proud of my involvement in this pioneering project. Not enough of us [female bird guides] are at the forefront of our industry and I was delighted when Prof. Turner approached me to be part of this initiative and I got to name one of the birds using my clan name.' Her story about naming the Pink-throated Twinspot as *umagumejana* resonates with points made by co-authors Roger and Noleen about the importance of incorporating local language and culture into conservation efforts if they are to be successful at grassroots level. Birds are not only about scientific 'stuff'; the cultural significance of biodiversity is key.

INGRID WEIERSBYE, TRUSTEE OF THE JOHN VOELCKER BIRD BOOK FUND

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