

# Green & gold

Flying our national colours, the Cape parrot is SA's most patriotic bird. But a 'doomsday virus' has left it hanging on by a wing and a prayer

**Polly doesn't want a cracker.** That stuff'll kill you. What South Africa's only endemic parrot really wants is a nice slice of yellowwood fruit. Problem is, we've cut those forests down. This has left the Cape parrot in a fix.

'The Cape parrot is the most endangered bird in South Africa right now and the most endangered parrot in Africa,' says Dr Steve Boyes, principal investigator for the Wild Bird Trust's Cape Parrot Project. 'We are the only custodians of this iconic parrot and are at risk of losing it forever.'

Over the past 50 years, populations have plummeted by 90 percent, leaving the bird critically endangered – only 800 to 1 000 Cape parrots remain in the wild.

Steve is based in Hogsback village, where he watches over the largest remaining population in the Eastern Cape's Amathole mountains. 'We've spent 350 years ripping these forests apart, especially targeting yellowwoods. The parrots found themselves with nowhere to live. They were historically almost entirely dependent on yellowwood fruits for food throughout the year and yellowwood trees for nesting.'

Deprived of their natural diet, parrots started feeding on exotic foods such as pecan nuts. Farmers got into a flap, starting 'the pecan wars' of the 1970s. 'You would have 200 or 300 Cape parrots arrive at your pecan orchard and start ripping it to pieces,' Steve says. 'Farmers started shooting them, putting nets up, catching them, clubbing them to

death and doing horrible things like firing rock salt in shotguns and banging pots, whatever they could.'

Worse was to come. Today the birds suffer from junk-food overload – turns out eating pecans is as bad for them as daily trips to fast-food joints are for us. 'Yellowwoods are a very specialised food item. They have antimicrobial activity, it cleanses their bodies, it's got the right amount of fat and the right amount of protein. But the food items they are eating now are full of sugar, full of fat – it's causing their health to decline.'

Last year, Cape parrots were hard hit by 'beak and feather' disease. 'It's almost like a doomsday virus for an endangered parrot,' says Steve. 'It's immuno depressive, it attacks the feather follicles so the feathers don't grow properly.' This year the virus appears to have fizzled out, but it's taken a heavy toll, with Steve seeing up to half the number of parrots he did in 2010.

Now, the project is gearing up for the biggest Cape parrot research venture ever undertaken. 'We aim to capture 50 Cape parrots from sites in Limpopo, KZN, Transkei and Amathole region, and use blood and feather samples ... to determine beak and feather disease infection rates and do DNA fingerprinting for the entire wild population. Very exciting stuff and an unbelievable amount of work.'

## Save Our Parrot

Bird lovers can donate money to the Wild Bird Trust or sponsor a Cape parrot nest box. 'This costs R650 and the nest boxes are made in a community-based workshop, so they will be creating jobs while helping to save the Cape parrot. We hope to erect over 300 nest boxes along the Amathole mountain range,' says Dr Steve Boyes of the Cape Parrot Project. Citizen scientists can help collect data – write down Cape parrot sightings and email them to [boyes@worldparrottrust.org](mailto:boyes@worldparrottrust.org). Note the tree the birds were in, whether they were feeding and on what, whether they had yellow feathers or looked in poor condition and take photos for the archive. Join the Cape Parrot Project group on Facebook or get news via Twitter ([twitter.com/capeparrot](https://twitter.com/capeparrot)). [www.wildbirdtrust.com](http://www.wildbirdtrust.com)



## Diarise This, Tree Huggers

Learn how to turn over a new leaf in life at Cape Town's Kirstenbosch Botanical Gardens, which is hosting a free Biodiversity Expo at the Old Mutual Conference Centre from 5 to 8 May. There'll be lessons on greening your lifestyle, info on career and volunteering opportunities, interactive exhibits, short videos and orienteering challenges. [www.biodiversityexpo.blogspot.com](http://www.biodiversityexpo.blogspot.com)



**Q&A**  
with  
Cape parrot expert  
Dr Steve Boyes

**Where are Cape parrots found?** They are centred on our last remaining yellowwood forests – in southern KZN, in the Amathole and Transkei regions of the Eastern Cape, all above 1 000m in the high mountains. There's also a small, very interesting population up in Limpopo, and in a beautiful little yellowwood forest in the southern Soutpansberg in the Woodbush Forest, there's a small population of 50 to 60.

**What do they look like?** They are just a bit smaller than the African grey. When they are healthy, they have a wonderful golden head and a bright green body – our 'green and gold' parrot, like Bafana Bafana or the Springboks – a national icon.

**Could you teach them to say 'Pretty Polly'?** Absolutely. The Cape parrot and its closest cousins, the brown-necked parrot and the grey-headed parrot, have been proven to be the fastest parrots in the world to train, and are used in parrot training courses around the world. They do pick up language quite quickly.

**Is the pet trade a problem?** We are just about to cross a terrible milestone with more Cape parrots now in captivity than there are in the wild. Over the last 20 years, Cape parrots have become more and more popular, resulting in their market price soaring. [This has] caused a resurgence of illegal captures... We are working constantly in the Eastern Cape to keep up with where Cape parrots are feeding, especially outside of the forests where they are vulnerable to capture due to feeding lower to the ground. This keeps us one step ahead of the poachers. The problem isn't huge, but it is a significant threat when you are talking about a small population under pressure from a dangerous disease.



## No-Go For Mines

Miners and conservationists are notoriously unhappy bedfellows, but a new proposal might help them kiss and make up. Well, okay, at least start talking. The World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF-SA) and other NGOs have drawn up a list of 'no-go' mining zones and handed it to SA's Minister of Mineral Resources. Proposed areas include nature reserves, marine-protected areas and mountain catchment areas such as the Amatholes in the Eastern Cape (pictured above). Says WWF's head of biodiversity, Mark Botha: 'This proposal will enable the ministerto prevent mining and prospecting in certain areas of critical biodiversity, heritage and hydrological importance.'