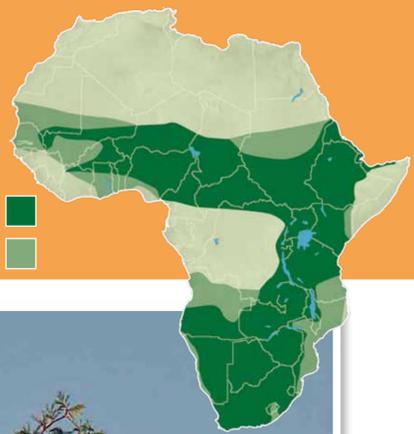




*Sagittarius
serpentarius*

BIRD OF THE YEAR 2019

SECRETARYBIRD



The Secretarybird, perhaps more than any other bird, is a symbol of wide-open horizons, vistas that humans are relentlessly narrowing.

Evolutionary enigma

For a long time it was never clear whether the Secretarybird was in fact a diurnal bird of prey at all. Structurally, it is only the hooked beak that is unmistakably raptorial and several other aspects of its morphology differ markedly from those of any other living bird of prey. Its neck is long but nowhere near as long as its stilt-like legs. The toes, though, are much shorter, with the hind toe being particularly reduced, and the talons are blunt, both features related to the terrestrial lifestyle of this 'marching eagle'. The tail is another elongated feature, specifically the central two tail feathers, which uniquely project some 50 per cent beyond the longest of the others.

Strider of the open plains

The Secretarybird is restricted to sub-Saharan Africa, where it is widely distributed, although it is largely confined to open or only relatively lightly wooded grasslands and shrublands. It requires good all-round vision, as its terrestrial habits render it vulnerable to ground-based predators. It also avoids areas with particularly tall, dense grassland, which impedes its movements and conceals potential enemies.



WARWICK TARBOTON (3)

A hard-working hunter

A hunting Secretarybird striding across the landscape, its head arching back and forward like a metronome, is one of the most emblematic African spectacles. It captures small prey, like insects, by simply bending forward and grabbing them in the bill before swallowing them whole. When the Secretarybird encounters larger prey, it compensates for the loss of grasping toes and sharp talons by stamping powerfully and accurately with its feet to dispatch its quarry.

Although famed as a killer of snakes, including venomous species such as cobras and adders, the Secretarybird infrequently targets them. The bulk of its diet usually comprises insects, especially grasshoppers, locusts and beetles, and small rodents. But a wide variety of other animals is also taken, such as scorpions, sun-spiders, crabs, frogs, lizards, chameleons, small tortoises, birds (including eggs and nestlings), shrews, golden moles and hedgehogs. Sometimes the victims are as large as hares, squirrels, polecats and mongooses.

Wandering stars

Although almost exclusively a ground-dwelling bird, the Secretarybird is a strong flyer. It can soar to great heights and cover long distances on the wing. Its preference for prey that typically shows local 'boom-and-bust' cycles means that it is quite nomadic in its habits, especially in drier regions.

A study by BirdLife South Africa of 10 juveniles fitted with tracking devices revealed amazingly wide-ranging movements after they left their nests. For example, 'BLING' moved from Limpopo Province north-west to the Makgadikgadi Pans in northern Botswana for several months. He then flew back to South Africa in a single day, visiting his original nesting grounds and making sojourns to the densely settled Gauteng area. This pattern of a rapid and distant dispersal from the nesting locality, followed by a return to the natal area, was typical of these tracked birds.



ALBERT FRONEMAN

Conservation efforts

BirdLife South Africa is involved in a number of initiatives to help conserve Secretarybirds.

- The tracking of fledged juveniles has provided a wealth of information about movements, survival rates, age of first breeding and mortality factors.
- BirdLife South Africa is a champion of Biodiversity Stewardship programmes designed to protect threatened birds and other wildlife on private land, which is where most Secretarybirds occur. The tracking study revealed that the Secretarybirds studied spent more than 96 per cent of their time on privately owned land.
- The organisation is drafting habitat management guidelines that will inform landowners about biodiversity-friendly farming techniques, particularly in the grassland biome.
- It is also looking into the problem of birds and fences and is developing a new method of fencing that will help reduce the number of birds, including Secretarybirds, being snagged on the top strands.



RICHARD FLACK



The next generation

Breeding in Secretarybirds is also affected by the ephemeral nature of their main prey. Although most breeding occurs during spring and summer, nesting can occur at any time of year when prey numbers are high. Under such conditions, one successful nesting effort can be immediately followed by another, a pattern virtually unknown in other large raptors.

Nests are bulky structures, up to two metres across. They are built on the crowns of trees that have dense canopies, making access from below difficult for predators. Nests are often constructed on relatively low trees, some just over two metres in height. The typical clutch size is one to three eggs and one or two young are usually reared per successful attempt. As with most birds of prey, most of the incubation is done by the female, with the male provisioning her. Because Secretarybirds cannot carry food in their modified feet, all prey is regurgitated to the young.

FOUND A NEST?

Help BirdLife South Africa grow its database of Secretarybird breeding events by sending your sighting to melissa.whitecross@birdlife.org.za. Please include the date and time of the sighting, and the GPS location of the nest, as well as any additional information (such as the number of eggs/chicks and the approximate age of the chicks) that you can obtain without disturbing the birds.



Shrinking prospects

The Secretarybird is facing a bleak future. Evidence shows rapid decreases in recent decades from countries such as South Africa, Botswana and Tanzania. It has even dwindled dramatically in the Kruger National Park, one of Africa's largest protected areas. It is little wonder that the species is listed as Vulnerable, both globally and in South Africa.

Secretarybirds are intrinsically reliant on wide expanses of suitable habitat. However, human activities such as intensive crop farming, overgrazing, commercial afforestation and sprawling urban and rural human settlement, as well as bush encroachment, are reducing, fragmenting and degrading such landscapes at an accelerating rate. In some areas the species has benefited from bush clearance for agricultural practices, but this does not compensate for its expulsion from far greater swathes of its former range. Secretarybirds are susceptible to getting entangled in or colliding with the countless fences that many of them are forced to cross every day. They are also vulnerable to poisoning and drowning in farm reservoirs and to colliding with overhead transmission lines, the blades of wind turbines and motor vehicles. Disturbance and persecution at their nests are other challenges that they face.

TEXT BY DAVID ALLAN & MELISSA WHITECROSS