

Raptors & alien trees



ENDANGERED
WILDLIFE TRUST

BIRDS OF PREY
PROGRAMME

conservation in action



Ornithologists in South Africa have long been aware that a number of bird species have benefitted from the rapid growth of the forestry industry and the spread of alien trees into previously tree less areas. Birds of prey have been particularly affected, and the distributions and

populations of many raptors have expanded and increased significantly in response to the proliferation of alien trees.

Most of these are forest adapted birds, and many (e.g. African Wood Owl, African Crowned Eagle, Forest Buzzard, Rufous-chested Sparrowhawk, Ovambo Sparrowhawk, Little Sparrowhawk, Black Sparrowhawk, African Goshawk) have substantially extended their ranges with the spread of alien trees, and are now dependent on the persistence of alien trees to maintain their present distributions. The spread of alien trees has also had a negative effect on some of our open country raptors (e.g. Black Harrier, African Marsh Harrier and possibly Amur Falcon) which have lost habitat to afforestation.

The second problem is more subtle but more important, and ultimately concerns the long term health of our environment. Many of South Africa's open habitats, particularly our grasslands and heathlands, have been severely impacted by commercial forestry and the spread of invasive alien trees. In such situations, the removal of alien trees can only benefit the environment, and the resulting loss of forest raptors is an ecologically sound outcome. In other regions, however, alien trees are being removed from areas that were previously covered by tracts of indigenous forest. Rapid, permanent and wholesale clearing of plantations and stands of alien trees is likely to cause the extinction of locally indigenous and ecologically valuable raptors from these areas.

Problems with alien clearing

The recent drive to remove alien trees from parts of the

environment, initially spearheaded by the Working for Water Project of the Department of Water Affairs and Forestry, poses two significant threats to our tree-nesting birds of prey. Firstly, tree-felling activities have a direct and significant impact on occupied nests, either by causing the desertion of eggs or nestlings because of extreme disturbance in the area, or by completely destroying nests if the nest-tree itself is inadvertently targeted. Similarly, the clearing of important roost sites, particularly those used in the summer by flocks of migratory falcons (e.g. Lesser Kestrel, Amur Falcon) may have a significant negative effect on these threatened birds.

Recommendations for effective management

It is vital that, whenever possible, steps be taken to minimise the negative effects of alien tree clearing on our raptor populations. Some effective remedial actions include:

- Notifying the Endangered Wildlife Trust's Birds of Prey Programme of any planned clearing operation and requesting that a BoPP representative visit the site to determine which raptors are likely to be affected and advise accordingly.
- Adjusting felling schedules to accommodate active raptor nests, and ensuring that nestlings recovered from accidentally felled nest trees are deposited with accredited rehabilitation centres.
- Combining clearing activities with the planting of stands of fast-growing, locally indigenous trees as substitute habitats in areas that were previously forested.

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