



Mabula
Ground
Hornbill
Project



AIRLINK



**conservation partnerships like this:
the only way to save this endangered species**

January 2013

THE BIRD

The Southern Ground-Hornbill (*Bucorvus leadbeateri*) is now classed as an endangered species in South Africa and without conservation intervention it is projected we will lose them in 50 – 100 years. They are special birds for a number of reasons:

- They are a flagship species - threatened with extinction on Africa's savannahs - along with such other charismatic animals as rhinos, cheetah, secretarybirds and wild dogs.
- Only about 400 – 500 groups remain in South Africa, half of them safe within the boundaries of the greater Kruger National Park.
- They eat small animals, anything from termites to snakes, making them respected across the continent for their role in pest control.
- It is the largest bird in the world to breed in cooperative groups of 3 – 12: only one pair breeds and the rest help them raise the chick.
- Each group defends a huge territory of 100 – 250 km².
- They live about as long as us.
- They breed very slowly and rear only one chick every few years.
- Their deep booming calls can be heard up to 5km away and is used as a natural alarm clock and an African drumming rhythm.



THE PROBLEM:

Because they breed so slowly they are extremely vulnerable to a number of human threats:

- **Accidental or secondary poisoning** - farmers who indiscriminately put out poison (often in the hope of getting rid of jackals and the like) poison the birds – they are 100% carnivorous and will scavenge on poisoned baits. They also eat insects poisoned by agricultural pesticides (both legal substance used in contravention of their label indications and black-market banned substances).
- **Direct persecution** as 'problem animals' because they break windows - this is part of their territorial nature – they are extremely territorial to protect their territory, nest and breeding female. When they see their reflection in a glass pane or a mirror their first instinct is to 'fight' the intruder and unfortunately this leads to broken glass and irate home owners.
- **Use in traditional practices** for keeping away lightning and for traditional medicine;
- **Electrocution** on transformer boxes; and
- **Loss of suitable habitat**, in particular the very specific nesting trees they need for breeding. They require huge trees with hollows for breeding and these need to be at least 40cm in diameter.
- **Very slow reproductive rate** – their age at first breeding is around 10 years, only one chick is raised successfully every 9 years (on average from the Kruger data) and they live till they are in their 50's. This means that if a farmer wipes out a group it can be decades before those reproductive birds are replaced in the breeding population.

Project Background:

This Project (a registered NPO) was founded in 1999 at Mabula Private Game Reserve (where it is still based). A decade later and this Project had trailed a number of innovative conservation options and is now a fully-fledged National Conservation Project and the Birdlife International Species Guardian. This is the only Project solely dedicated to the future of these endangered and charismatic birds and as such carries much of the responsibility for the species' persistence within our borders and beyond.



What we do: Of the six priority goals on the Species Recovery Plan put together by the SGH Action Group – we cover five. We work across the country (Mpumalanga, Limpopo, Kwa-Zulu Natal and the Eastern Cape) to mitigate the threats and investigate new conservation options.

1. Our major role is the **facilitation and coordination of the harvest** of 'doomed' second chick from wild nests for hand-rearing at specialised hand-rearing facilities for release back into the wild (Johannesburg Zoo, Montecasino Bird Gardens, Loskop Dam and Boscia Birds). This **reintroduction** efforts is to restock areas where the birds have become *locally extinct* (60% of their natural range) to halt the decline and slowly work towards rebuilding the population back to sustainable levels.

2. Research and monitoring of the wild populations beyond the borders of Kruger National Park.

3. Fieldwork into Southern Africa to ascertain the viability of other populations in Zimbabwe, Zambia, Mozambique and Botswana and throughout the rest of the African range and the threats facing the species.

4. Research into the genetic structure of the population – to establish how the various populations in South Africa and across the continent are related and how they disperse.

5. Education and Awareness Campaigns – we target schools, farmers associations and any other forums in the areas where we release the birds with an education campaign.



How you have helped:

The provision of flights for these chicks (and a human carer) has completely changed the harvesting season, for our team and for the chicks themselves. Before this we used to drive them, all the way from the nests to the waiting hand-rearers (at Johannesburg Zoo and Loskop Dam), often roundtrips lasting well over 20 hours, putting strain on our vehicles, fuel budget and drivers. More importantly though, the long transit time put strain on the chicks. Any amount of stress compromises their immune systems and now that the long drives have been abolished the chicks are getting to the rearers, - faster and calmer – thus seriously improving their chances of survival. These little chicks are the future of their species in South Africa and so the sponsorship of flights has directly increased their chances.

Thus far all but two of the eleven harvested chicks have survived and are growing well. The surviving chicks (all named after their nests are mostly from the Kruger National Park and the Associated Private Nature Reserves) are: Karan Khaya (APNR), Mangake (KNP), Phalaborwa (KNP), Tinto (Phalaborwa Mining Company), Mokaikai (Mabula), Mudzadzene (KNP), Janovski (APNR), Hull (APNR) and Jumbo (KNP).



Assistant Manager Natasha Nienaber about to board with one of the harvested chicks.



The bosses of the sky giving a helping hand on board to settle the chick in.



Mokaikai at hatching (left) and looking strong at one month (above).

Chick completing its hatching en route.



thank you

Thank you to you all – Karin and Sandra to the check-in counters to security to on-board assistance (and all the behind-the-scenes folk) – it all went smoothly and we are very grateful.



From the Mabula Ground-Hornbill Team