

## Birds and Muthi (Medicine)



Verreaux's/Black Eagle *Aquila verreauxii*

*"There is a strong cultural link between the African ancestors and birds. For centuries, African people have been using indigenous birds not just for food and decorative purposes but to treat illnesses and to help them deal with difficult and often unexplained psychological or spiritual affairs. Birds have been used to treat physical and mental illnesses, strengthen relationships, encourage good luck, and help promote dignity, to cast spells and to strengthen individuals and give them protection against evil spirits."*

*Sue Derwent and Myles Mander  
"Africa Birds and Birding"*

One of the issues facing conservationists is the exploitation of animals and plants for use in traditional African medicine (muthi). Many remedies and potions based on plants and animal parts have been passed down over hundreds of years through generations of healers, diviners and sorcerers who still enjoy the trust and confidence of millions of people today.

**African Fish-Eagle** – all eagles are a symbol of power and will help one catch one's prey or achieve specific goals; the Fish-Eagle and Bateleur are among the most in demand.

**Southern Ground-Hornbill** – protection against lightning, also protection of the family as Southern Ground-Hornbills lay very few eggs and several adults are responsible for their maintenance.

**Brown-headed Parrot** – the Parrot sees everything and talks loudly about what it sees; it is therefore used to enable one to be kept informed on important matters.

**African Pygmy-Kingfisher** – the kingfisher's ability to catch fish has made it a symbol of success amongst fishermen; more broadly it also has power to help one get what one desires.

Research published online in 2006 by the City of Durban, which has one of the biggest traditional medicine markets in Africa, reveals that an estimated 27 million South Africans are traditional medicine consumers who spend between 4 and 6% of their annual income on traditional medicines and services. In the process, they consume some 20 000 tons of plant material.

Although the demand for muthi currently places far more pressure on endangered plants than on birds, avifauna still accounts for an important part of the traditional African medicine chest. The symbolism of a particular bird often dictates its use.

Traditional healer Zodwa Khumalo told researchers, the **Honeyguide's** are very clever. So if we need to be clever to find something, we can use this bird.' Dismissive of western cynicism, she went on to say, 'White people may laugh at our ways, but I can promise you, these medicines work. White people are too frightened to try but they would be surprised at how simple the medicine is and how well it works.'

Different bird parts are used in different ways and usually mixed with plant and sometimes other animal material, depending on the desired outcome. Bird bones are ground to a powder, feathers burnt and the smoke inhaled, and eggshells are crushed and used in various concoctions.

Approximately 35 bird species are regularly used in making muthi, with eagles (particularly the **African Fish-Eagle** which is a symbol of power), **vultures** and the **Southern Ground-Hornbill** being highest in demand.

Traditional healers argue that it is in their interests to conserve muthi birds for future use and that because of the nature of their craft, they intimately understand and respect the birds that are used in medicine. Nonetheless, conservationists have a valid concern that the high demand for traditional medicine in rural and urban communities puts certain species at risk. Among the most vulnerable species is the **Southern Ground-Hornbill** because they are slow to flee danger.

Whatever developments unfold in the future relating to the use of birds in indigenous medicine, Kruger's importance as a sanctuary for plant and animal life will only increase.

#### **Birds at the Muthi Market**

Parts of the following bird species found by researchers Myles Mander and Sue Derwent at the Traditional Healer's Market in Durban, 2006.

Southern Ground-Hornbill	Trumpeter Hornbill
Tawny Eagle	White-headed Vulture
African Pygmy-Kingfisher	Giant Kingfisher
Blacksmith Lapwing	Spotted Eagle-Owl
African Grass-Owl	Golden-tailed Woodpecker
Burchell's Coucal	Grey-headed Gull
White-faced Duck	Hadeda Ibis
Hamerkop	Purple-crested Turaco
Knysna Turaco	Common Ostrich
Pied Crow	White Pelican
Cape White-eye	Shy Albatros

#### **Bird of Prey Hypothesis**

Birds occupy a certain place in human mythology, usually representing supernatural forces, and often specifically evil. This may seem strange given human superiority over other species on the planet today. However, there may be some innate fear of large raptors that is deeply hardwired into human consciousness. Consider this story relating to one of the world's most famous fossils, the 2.4 million-year-old Taung Child revealed to the world by Professor Raymond Dart in 1925.

In 1993, during a palaeoanthropological excavation at Gladdysvale in the Cradle of Humankind near Johannesburg, Professor Lee Berger saw a pair of **Verreaux's Eagles** attack a troop of vervet monkeys. While one bird acted as a decoy, its partner swooped down and grabbed an unsuspecting monkey by the head and flew off with it. This was a moment of scientific synchronicity for the Professor who remembered that the Taung Child had an unexplained depression on the back of its fossilised skull. He tracked down the Verreauxs' nest in some nearby cliffs and in the undergrowth below found a juvenile baboon skull which had almost exactly the same damage as that of the Taung Child.

Working with colleague Dr Ron Clarke, Professor Berger studied the fossil bones associated with a number of fossil sites and found that the Taung fossil types were consistent with the remains found around the nests of African eagles.

This provided strong circumstantial evidence that the Taung Child had been seized and killed by an ancient African eagle – probably an **African Crowned Eagle** – at a time when our earliest forebears were victims of the environment rather than the masters of it. Such attacks, however, are not confined to the recesses of history and some of Africa's larger birds of prey may still be responsible for human deaths. There is an authenticated report of an **African Crowned Eagle** recently attacking a seven-year-old boy in Zambia, unsuccessfully trying to carry him away.



## Black Eagle Project Roodekrans

17<sup>th</sup> October 2013 - # 7

The eagles are finding it difficult to cope under the heat of our summer's sun, but at least prey is still being hunted and brought to the nest sometimes daily otherwise at least every second day. I have been receiving info from Esmé Solomons and Teresa Moore who thankfully observe the Black Eagle Africam – thanks for the feedback!

Last Sunday afternoon, it took Izanne Dalle Ave son, Andrea, only 15 minutes to configure the settings of the eagle cam in the office, swapped an incorrectly plugged cable and that's it! So, something that was out of order for almost 8 months got repaired in no time – many thanks young man...studying law might after all be a bad calling ☺

A fresh committee has been elected last Saturday 12<sup>th</sup> October 2013 and depending on the density of the manure scattered over us by SANBI, this project will undoubtedly grow fast as we have some good ideas and ideals up our sleeves. With committee decisions directly filtered back to all the project observers...equates to less secrecy and more involvement from everyone! The observers' expertise and talents will be roped in when required so that everyone is able to contribute towards the success of this project.

Two weeks ago I raised the issue of "patagial wing tagging" and surprisingly about 57% was dead against it in that they too were unsure about the long-term consequences such tags may have on the eagle. Thanks peeps for responding...I'm appreciative of your valued opinions!

Dennis Dry has re-joined the project after some time off. He was heavily involved with our Rock hyrax (dassie) capture and reintroduction project where we reintroduced about 785 live hyraxes into the greater home range of this eagle pair. Dennis will continue with his observations during the week and we look forward to his contributions! We also welcome Kelvin Thomas who has joined the project recently...you must enjoy and ask as many questions as you'd like...it's the only way of learning! ☺

Eagle greetings...

Bo van der Lecq  
BEPR & RCP