

# Elsie's Peak

# Birds on the Edge

by Phoebe Barnard and Rob Simmons

One of the most scenically-beautiful, fresh and accessible short hikes on the Far South Peninsula has been featured by Sean and Dales in *Full Circle* – the trails up Elsie's Peak (303m above sea-level) in the Table Mountain National Park from Fish Hoek or Glencairn. If you have binoculars, keen eyes and ears, there's an extra attraction on the trail up from the Glencairn urban edge – the chance to watch the antics of colour-ringed birds, and contribute to a study of how fire, Climate Change and urbanization may affect birds.

For birds, the urban edge is both a risky and wondrous place. On one hand, there are dangers lurking – cats, dogs, alien plants, and frequent fires. On the other hand, humans and their gardens mean water, fruit, insects, and protection from veld-fires. Urbanization is not on balance a good thing for fynbos birds – some birds seem to be disappearing from the South Peninsula – but some species adapt to it better than others.

As part of our work for the SA National Biodiversity Institute at Kirstenbosch and the University of Cape Town, we're interested in how birds cope with Climate Change, fire and land-use change, such as urbanization.

When we moved to Glencairn, we were happy to see ravens, peregrines, kestrels,

sugarbirds and sunbirds on our new doorstep. But although the raptors featured in last month's issue are well known, the smaller, more ubiquitous fynbos endemic birds, which occur nowhere else but in the Cape Floral Kingdom, are poorly studied. So in 2008 we cleared time to start an approved research project in the Park to help put right this imbalance.

If you enter Table Mountain National Park from the Glencairn Heights trailhead on Golconda Street, it's easy to see and hear Cape Sugarbirds (*Promerops cafer*), Malachite and Orange-breasted Sunbirds (*Nectarinia famosa* and *Anthobaphes violacea*), musical Cape Grassbirds (*Sphenoeacus afer*), Karoo Prinias (*Prinia maculosa*) and ventriloquial Bokmakieries (*Telophorus zeylonus*). Many of these birds have been gently captured and released, and now sport bright colour-rings to identify them as individuals.

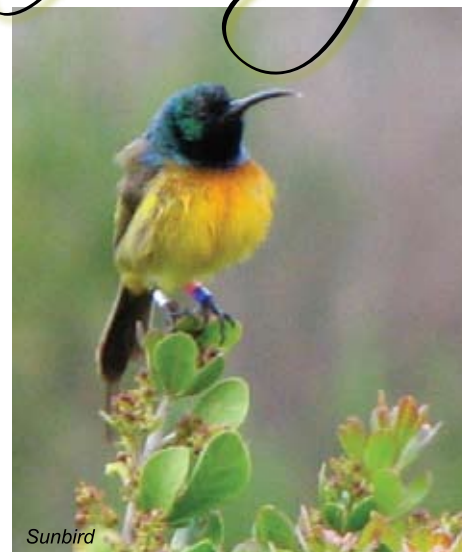
These bright denizens of the fynbos are feature actors in a story that plays itself out, normally unseen, all around the Cape Floral Kingdom.

From an environmental-change viewpoint, we need to study birds' lives in some detail to understand how they cope with fire, Climate Change, or even the immediate pressures of urbanization.

One of the best ways is to mark birds individually with colour leg-rings. This lets us study how long they live, how they behave, where they go, how they rely on fynbos and garden foods such as bird-feeders and fruiting bushes, and when they moult and breed. So we catch birds gently in mist-nets, under SANParks and Cape Nature Conservation permits (and after much training!), measure and ring them, and release them a few minutes later.

Birds in our study wear a lightweight, individually-numbered metal ring inscribed with the words 'Inform SAFRING Univ Cape Town'. SAFRING is the Southern African Bird Ringing Unit at UCT, to which ringed birds should be reported. Most birds also have a unique combination of two to three brightly-coloured plastic rings on their legs, visible from a distance.

For example, Cape Grassbird 'yellow over yellow' (YY) is a vigorous songster and a sharp-eyed,



Sunbird

russet beauty of the central jeep-track. He and his mate have had at least three chicks from two nests since October 2008, and defend a prime territory of at least 6 000m<sup>2</sup> of restio-rich, reasonably-mature fynbos.

Cape Grassbirds are well known to hikers for their beautifully-atmospheric, bubbling-brook song on misty days. Male YY is a fierce defender of his kingdom, but is less active in sun, wind, heat and rain.

If you like watching birds, have binoculars and a paper and pencil handy, your observations will be very helpful to us. Exact locations are especially valuable.

In general, adult birds remain in their territory while juveniles disperse. Recently we recaptured an adult sugarbird ringed in the valley in 2005 by ringer Margaret McCall, so these birds do remain in the area over years. Ringing has only a momentary effect on birds, and our ringed adult birds remain highly visible on their territories.

If you are a cat-owner, and your cat brings in a ringed bird, please do call us with the ring-number. The information will be valuable, and we hope it will make you reconsider the wisdom of allowing your cat to roam at night, especially on the edge of a National Park!

While you exult in the incredible natural beauty of a place like Elsie's Peak, remember that several species are found only in well-conserved fynbos habitats. You can help us unravel a bit of their secret lives with your observations and notes. Enjoy your hike, and remember to say a word of thanks to SANParks for its efforts to preserve such glorious fynbos! 🌿

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Grassbird