



STEENBOK NEWS

WHERE HAVE ALL THE DIKKOPS GONE?

Leisure Isle is home to a wide variety of birds, many of which visit residents' gardens to feast on the fruit and nectar of local indigenous flowering shrubs and trees, as well as the tasty morsels put out on bird feeders. Many gardens provide water in times of drought and a safe haven for nesting.

During the last few years bird life has been increasing in the Steenbok Nature Reserve, particularly in the forest areas around the Wandelpad and in the expanded indigenous garden areas. The introduction of a growing number of new tree copses should also attract certain birds.

There is however one bird whose numbers have dropped drastically over the years – today there are probably only three pairs remaining on the island.



Photo 2



Photo 1

This is the unfortunately named and somewhat misunderstood Spotted Thick-knee (*Burbinus capensis*) – previously known as the Spotted Dikkop. Not having the charisma of owls, the exotic colours of sunbirds and louries or the charm of wagtails and robins, this rather awkward long-legged bird with large prominent eyes does not generate much interest or attention.

The usual habitat of the Spotted Thick-knee is grassland and savannah. As the open areas on Leisure Isle previously favoured by Thick-knees have diminished, the Steenbok Nature Reserve remains one of their last safe havens. An area like Kingfisher Creek, where there are fewer dogs and walkers and no mowers and weed-eaters, is suitable for a breeding pair.

During the day the pairs prefer to sit or stand quietly in the shade in open areas where they are unlikely to be disturbed, trying to keep out of trouble. At night they become active and fly or run to where they can feed on insects. On moonlit nights in particular one hears their strange haunting call.



Photo 3

Thick-knees mate for life and bravely defend their mate, breeding territory and chicks by spreading their wings and sometimes rushing forward making a hissing and growling sound at anyone who gets too close, particularly during the breeding season.

The fact that they lay their eggs (usually two) on the bare ground in an open area, relying only on dry leaves and bark chips to disguise the eggs, makes them extremely

vulnerable to predators such as dogs and cats, as well as the Spotted Eagle-owl, Pied Crow and Burchell's Coucal.



Photo 4

Thick-knees breed mainly between August and December, but will continue laying clutches of eggs until March, if previous breeding attempts have been unsuccessful. It takes two months before the chicks are big enough to fly and sometimes during this time the little family takes refuge in large sheltered gardens with wild areas. Hopefully Steenbok Nature Reserve will be able to provide a safe haven for these family groups in the not too distant future.

Photos by Trevor Hardaker (1) Roger Voysey (2) and Margaret Richards (3-4)

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The details are on our web site or alternatively phone Roger on (083) 7545390

www.steenboknaturereserve.org.za