



AFRICAN OPENBILLS

on the move

BRIAN ALDRIDGE

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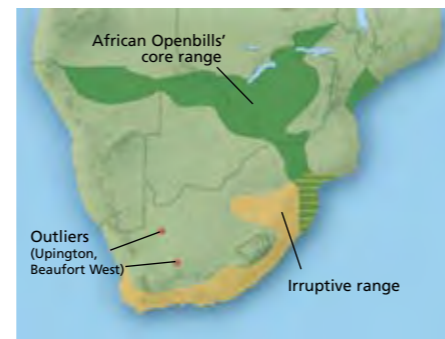
In a time of global change, birds and other organisms are predicted to change their ranges. Such movements may be gradual, linked to changes in the distribution of suitable habitat, such as the invasion of the Western Cape by Hadedda Ibises *Bostrychia hagedash* (see *Africa – Birds & Birding* 8(5): 35–41), or they may be sudden events, resulting in only temporary range changes, typically driven by adverse conditions in their usual distribution.

Such rapid events are termed irruptions and are a fairly regular occurrence at high latitudes, where severe temperatures drive species towards warmer

The influx of African Openbills was monitored from locations as diverse as river banks in the Western Cape (above) and country gardens in KwaZulu-Natal (opposite).

climates (for example, Snowy Owl *Nyctea scandiaca* irruptions in Eurasia and North America). They are less common in Africa, where they tend to be linked to rainfall. For example, during droughts in south-western Africa, Dusky Sunbirds *Cinnyris fuscus*, Black-headed Canaries *Serinus alario* and Lark-like Buntings *Emberiza impetuani* occasionally irrupt into more mesic areas outside their semi-arid habitats. Seabirds can also have spectacular irruptions, such as the winter 1984 influx of Kerguelen Petrels *Lugensa brevirostris* and Blue Petrels *Halobaena caerulea*, which occurred throughout the Southern Ocean, with birds reaching Brazil and Australia as well as South Africa.

The summer of 2009/10 will be remembered for the unprecedented irruption of African Openbills *Anastomus lamelligerus* throughout South Africa. A fairly common resident in the lowveld



and Zululand, it is a rare vagrant to other parts of the country. The first record of an out-of-range Openbill was a single bird in the KwaZulu-Natal Midlands in mid-November 2009. Three days later, 30 were found near Potchefstroom in the North West Province. By the end of November a flock of 20 was seen in the Midlands, and one bird was recorded near East London in the Eastern Cape. By mid-December birds had reached the Western Cape, with one near Beaufort West in the Karoo and another even further west on the Bot River, east of Cape Town. Their numbers then started to climb. By Christmas there were sightings of flocks of 200 in southern KwaZulu-Natal, 20 at Graaff-Reinet in the Eastern Cape, and almost 50 near Riebeeck West, north of Cape Town. In

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January there were sightings from all along the eastern and southern seaboard between KwaZulu-Natal and the Western Cape, with several reaching the Cape Peninsula, and extending up the West Coast at least as far as Verlorenvlei at Elands Bay. It is hard to estimate the total number of out-of-range birds, but the irruption must have involved close to 1 000 individuals.

Two questions arise. Where did all these birds come from? And why did they move so far out of their normal range? The breeding population of Openbills in South Africa is only a hundred or so pairs, begging the conclusion that they moved into South Africa from further north. But quite where is unknown. Vast numbers breed in Zambia in winter and the timing of the irruption suggests that they could be birds dispersing from these colonies after breeding. The only recovery of a Zambian Openbill was that of a fledgling ringed in July on the Kafue Flats and recovered six months later in northern Namibia, indicating that at least some Zambian birds do move south after fledging. Irruptions often involve young, naive birds, but adults as well as juveniles were involved in the recent movements. Interestingly, there were also a few Openbills on the move in 2008/09, with one at Potchefstroom in mid-November and another in the KwaZulu-Natal Midlands in mid-December. It is possible that small numbers of Openbills disperse south in early summer each year and that this event reached unprecedented proportions in 2009/10.

We can only speculate why the 2009/10 irruption occurred. Conditions in the Openbills' normal range have not been exceptionally dry or wet, but some of their traditional habitat has been lost. Zambia's Kafue Flats used to be a key summer foraging area for Openbills, probably accommodating birds from the vast Barotse floodplain further west as water levels fall along the upper Zambezi River. In November

1970, an estimated 500 000 African Openbills were counted on the Kafue Flats. Since the 1980s, however, Kafue has been invaded by *Mimosa pigra*, a thorny shrub from South America that flourishes on seasonally inundated land. By 2005, more than 3 000 hectares of floodplain had been lost, and the weed continues to spread at an ever-increasing rate. Recent surveys at Kafue show that areas invaded by *Mimosa* support just one per cent of the number of Openbills compared to pristine floodplain (Shamungu 2009, *Biodiversity* 10: 56–60). Populations of many other waterbirds have also been severely impacted.

The Openbill event follows on the heels of an irruption of Marabou Storks *Leptoptilos crumeniferus* into the Western and Eastern Cape in 2008/09. Both irruptions occurred in summer. Out-of-range Marabous were first recorded near Beaufort West in mid-December and by early January there were flocks of up to 70 near Port Elizabeth and more than 20 near Cape Town. As with the Openbills, the numbers of Marabous involved make it almost certain that the majority originated from outside South Africa. Some remained around the Cape Peninsula until at least June 2009, but have since disappeared.

How long the Openbills persist in their new environment remains to be seen. Whether there is any link between the factors driving the two stork irruptions is unknown. What does seem highly likely, however, is that both species were driven south and west by deteriorating environmental conditions in areas where they are naturally common.

PETER RYAN & PHIL HOCKEY

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What the...?

Our readers kept track of the Openbills as they made their way through the country. Here are two of the letters we received.

Sitting on our veranda, we were astonished to see African Openbills flying overhead. They landed in the common garden of our village, next to a dam (below). Later they were joined by more and we ended up with no fewer than 11 birds in total. They are not known to occur in our region and we believe they have never been seen here before. Could this be climate change making them move out of their normal habitat?

ANN CANNELL

NOTTINGHAM ROAD, KWAZULU-NATAL

On a recent visit to my house on the Breede River in the Overberg, I spent the best part of 15 January slowly burbling along the river banks in my small rubber duck, admiring a profusion of waterbirds. On a sandbank about two kilometres upriver of Malgas, I spotted three birds which in 40 years of being on the river I had never before seen in this part of southern Africa.

Such was my surprise that I hit the sandbank and went flying, thankfully without disturbing the birds. I identified them as African Openbills, and the following day I returned to the location to make sure I hadn't been imagining them – and sure enough, there they were (opposite).

This time I had my camera and was able to record these unusual visitors to the south-western Cape.

BRIAN ALDRIDGE

CAPE TOWN, WESTERN CAPE



ANN CANNELL