

# Saddle-billed Stork



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If you've recently returned from a birding trip to one of southern Africa's large bushveld conservation areas, you could be forgiven for thinking that the Saddle-billed Stork *Ephippiorhynchus senegalensis* is a widespread and successful species. Within the boundaries of, say, the Kruger National Park, you can see this stately and conspicuous species quite readily as it stalks the fringes of many of the dams and rivers. But look for it in similar habitat outside protected areas and you're likely to be disappointed. In fact, the number of Saddle-billed Storks has probably decreased markedly over the past few decades as the population has steadily receded deeper into the big lowveld parks.

While it has apparently always been relatively scarce throughout its extensive afro-tropical distribution, all indications are that the Saddle-billed Stork is in trouble. The most recent surveys of the South African population, which date back to the 1990s, suggest a total of fewer than 150 birds. Most of these reside in the Kruger National Park and its adjacent conservancies, but even this huge area supported only 20 active nests some 15 years ago. The species is classified as Endangered in South Africa, but only of Least Concern globally, mostly because it occupies such a vast total range.

Why is the Saddle-billed Stork struggling? At present we can only speculate about the conservation status of this poorly known species and the factors that possibly threaten its long-term survival. Recent efforts to repeat previous survey work (see opposite) should clarify the current health of the South African population and could also shed light on key environmental issues to consider in assessing the bird's conservation biology.

Some fairly obvious and likely red flags are already flying. Firstly, this is a big bird that occurs in isolated, widely spread pairs, and it breeds slowly and irregularly – an unfavourable demographic profile. Secondly, it needs large trees for nesting and



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fresh water as a source of decent-sized fish (its staple diet), so its resource requirements are quite demanding. Thirdly, it may be sensitive to human disturbance, so even thinly populated areas may be no-go zones. In addition, the stork's dependence on wetlands, and in particular large rivers, means that it is exposed to the effects wrought by dams, soil erosion and silting, and to the chemical pollution of these systems.

The last may prove to be the clincher for the Saddle-billed Stork, because the effects of upstream activities can, and almost certainly do, impact on downstream river conditions, even where storks are otherwise protected in conservation areas. It is likely that we are going to need stricter controls on mining and agricultural practices in critical catchment areas to secure the future of this charismatic species.

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**Above** A pair of Saddle-billed Storks interacting in typical riverine habitat. The male (on the right) has dark eyes and small, yellow wattles at the base of his bill.

**Opposite** Its large size, pied plumage and striking facial markings render the Saddle-billed Stork an unmistakable and memorable bird to see.

## What can be done?

In addition to lobbying to have our rivers and wetlands protected by improved and better-enforced legislation, one important contribution that birdwatchers can make to promoting the welfare of the Saddle-billed Stork is to participate in the newly launched photographic survey of this species in the Kruger National Park.

Coordinated jointly by the Endangered Wildlife Trust and South African National Parks, this initiative encourages visitors to Kruger to look out for and photograph this familiar bird. Good images that clearly show the bill and facial markings are required. These markings are unique to individual birds and can be used to help estimate the size and distribution of the park's stork population, as well as to study movements and habitat use and preferences.

For more information, go to [www.ewt.org.za](http://www.ewt.org.za) or e-mail Marcelle van den Hoven at [storks@ewt.org.za](mailto:storks@ewt.org.za)

