



A male Namaqua Sandgrouse with chicks.  
This species could be declining in South Africa due to low nesting success.

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## SANDGROUSE AS GAMEBIRDS

Sandgrouse have been hunted by man for millennia – their habit of descending in large flocks to drink at isolated waterholes at predictable times in the mornings or evenings has made them especially conspicuous and vulnerable to capture and killing. Earlier this century farmers in the northern Karoo shot them by the thousands, plucking the feathers for pillows and drying the filleted flight muscles as morsels of biltong. The subsistence hunting of sandgrouse continues on a diminished scale to this day, but they are now becoming an increasingly important component of the gamebird-hunting industry in southern Africa.

Gamebird hunting can provide a significant supplementary income to rural communities and can make an important contribution to the conservation of the target birds if it is managed sustainably. For

example, the hunting of Grey-wing Francolin *Francolinus africanus* in the Eastern Cape Province of South Africa currently realises in the region of R360 000 annually in gross revenues, and provides a significant incentive for farmers to conserve grassland habitat for this bird.

Until recently, however, sandgrouse were hunted with little regard to sustainability, possibly because of their perceived abundance and the notion that as successful, opportunistic, seed-eating birds, they should have a high breeding potential. In Botswana until recently, Burchell's Sandgrouse *Pterocles burchelli* were hunted throughout their breeding season, a situation that has reportedly led to a substantial decline in their numbers in the affected regions.

Acquiring at least a working understanding of

the biology, ecology and population dynamics of individual gamebird species is an important prerequisite for the successful management of their populations for sustainable use. To this end, the African Gamebird Research, Education and Development (AGRED) Trust has invested approximately R2.1-million over the past 10 years into six research projects on South African gamebirds, in partnership with the Percy FitzPatrick Institute.

Recent research arising from this partnership has provided the impetus for altering sandgrouse hunting seasons across southern Africa, and for the development of a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on sandgrouse conservation between the governments of Botswana, Namibia and South Africa. This MoU will provide better protection measures for sandgrouse in terms of the Bonn Convention on migratory

species. It is already facilitating co-operation between conservation agencies for the more efficient management of sandgrouse that move across the borders of these three southern African countries, either nomadically or on migration.

The Namaqua Sandgrouse *Pterocles namaqua* is the most mobile of the four southern African sandgrouse species, being both highly nomadic and migratory between the Namib/Karoo and Kalahari regions. A project monitoring the breeding success of this species in its core breeding area in the Karoo over four consecutive years has found that disturbingly low breeding success may be resulting in population declines, particularly within South Africa. The problem lies in the exceptionally high levels of nest predation, mainly by mongooses. This has raised the suspicion that the stringent control of larger predators, particularly large raptors and jackals (which are important predators of mongooses), by farmers in this sheep-farming region has allowed mongooses either to increase in number and/or to forage with impunity across the exposed areas where Namaqua Sandgrouse nest. □

Visit the FitzPatrick website:  
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