

African Grass-Owl



Above A fully grown immature African Grass-Owl still shows some buff coloration on its face and breast.



Right A typical nest site, positioned in long grass.

The African Grass-Owl *Tyto capensis* is a close relative of the Barn Owl *T. alba* and, like that widespread and very well-known species, it is perfectly equipped to hunt rodents in thick cover at night. Its big, highly sensitive eyes enable it to see accurately in low light conditions, it has a prominent facial disc to focus its hearing, relatively large wings and super-soft plumage that allow it to fly low, slowly and quietly, and long legs with strong, sharp talons to grab and extract wriggling mice from the undergrowth. But unlike the cosmopolitan Barn Owl, the Grass-Owl is a habitat specialist. It has a patchy distribution across western, Central and southern Africa and is restricted to open, mainly grassy habitats, where it favours the rank, damp vicinities of marshes, vleis and floodplains. Unfortunately, such well-watered grasslands are subject to increasing human pressure, and the African Grass-Owl has probably lost much of its ancestral habitat to the draining, grazing, burning and cultivation of wetland fringes and, more recently, to encroachment by urban sprawl. It has also suffered the consequences of an expanding road and transport infrastructure, and many Grass-Owls are killed as they hunt in the reserves of major roadways constructed through prime owl country. Taller, ungrazed grass, and grain spillages from haulage trucks attract rodents to road verges, drawing hungry owls to



the danger zone and, ultimately, into the oncoming lights of speeding vehicles.

A silent assassin of African wetlands, the secretive and nocturnal Grass-Owl has also managed to fly largely beneath the research and conservation radar and is remarkably little known. Evidently it is rare (it is estimated that there are fewer than 5 000 birds in southern Africa) and becoming rarer, but there is little clarity on where it may have occurred historically, or even on where it occurs now. In southern Africa, the African Grass-Owl may be locally common in parts of Zimbabwe, over much of the highveld in South Africa, including heavily developed areas around Gauteng, and in isolated locations in the southern and south-western Cape. It hunts very much in the way that harriers do during the day, quartering the ground slowly and methodically, occasionally twisting and plunging down in response to a tell-tale twitch or rustle in the long grass. Its favourite prey is the vlei-rat, but it may take items as small as beetles and flying ants, and can tackle animals as large as Cape mole-rats and hedgehogs.

During the day it rests up in systems of interconnected cavities created under the canopy of tall vegetation. It nests on the ground in these 'cave systems', apparently



Top Four-week-old owlets at the nest site.

Above A six-week-old Grass-Owl nestling demonstrates how this species retains its down for longer than would be expected; the downy plumage helps to act as camouflage in its grassy habitat. A Barn Owl of the same age would be fully feathered.

timing its breeding to coincide with highest rainfall, tallest grass and maximum rodent abundance. It can raise more than one brood a year when conditions are good, laying up to six eggs in a clutch, but usually only successfully fledges two or three young per brood.

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What can be done?

African Grass-Owl habitat is poorly represented in South Africa's existing network of protected areas, and the fate of this species probably depends on the future management of privately owned wetlands and rank grasslands. There is an urgent need not only to ring-fence the remaining habitat, but to rehabilitate some of the suitable areas already lost to ignorant or short-sighted farming practices.

Efforts to reduce roadkills have focused on making drivers aware of the presence of owls on carriageways at night, encouraging the haulage industry to contain grain more securely, and discouraging owls from hunting along the roadside.

Ultimately, effective conservation action can only be achieved on a foundation of reliable information and good understanding. At this stage, the information requirements for African Grass-Owl conservation are still quite basic. A dedicated African Grass-Owl task force has been formed under the auspices of the Birds of Prey Working Group of the Endangered Wildlife Trust with the express purpose of discovering where these birds do actually occur, how they operate, and how threatened they are by the environmental pressures they face.

The birding public can assist this initiative by keeping a look-out for Grass-Owls in any likely habitat and reporting sightings to the Task Force Coordinator, Geoff Lockwood, at geofrey@iafrica.com, or to André Botha, manager of the Birds of Prey Working Group at andreb@ewt.org.za

