





ALAN LEE

# killing crows

‘What do you think of the crow problem?’ asked the owner of the Williston Mall in the Northern Cape. ‘There never used to be this many crows,’ said the wife of a farmer, east of Loeriesfontein. On noticing the BirdLife South Africa logo on our vehicle, a farmer from Kenhardt commented, ‘I hope you’re here to do something about the crows. There are millions of them along the train line.’

Almost everywhere we’ve gone while on the Karoo Birds Research and Conservation programme, managed by BirdLife South Africa’s Dale Wright, crows have been a topic of conversation with the landowners and residents of the Karoo when discussing birds. In a few cases Pied Crows were indicated to be useful: they show where a jackal or caracal has taken a lamb. But in most cases, ‘*Ek haat ’n kraai*’ (‘I hate

crows’) is not uncommonly heard from anyone in the sheep industry. And the bird is indeed an easy target for farmers to hate if it pecks out the eyes of a new-born lamb. In a story reminiscent of the fate suffered by the albatrosses on Marion Island, I was told of the skin being pecked clean off the head of a lamb while it was still alive.

During the BirdLife South Africa survey, I frequently asked, ‘What is your favourite bird?’ There were many different answers, a reflection of the fact that the beauty of birds lies in their diversity; there are as many ways to please as there are birds. Unpopular birds included the ‘noisy’ species (Hadeda Ibis, Egyptian Goose and even Black Korhaan) or ‘damaging’ birds, such as weavers. But roughly three quarters of the people responding to the question about problem birds replied ‘*Witborskraai*’, the Pied Crow.

It is indisputable that crows are on the increase. This is not surprising as we’ve done everything to make conditions ideal for them: we’ve built predator-inaccessible nesting structures in the form of telephone poles and pylons; we provide a steady source of food by way of roadkill and rubbish dumps; and we’re changing the climate just the way they like it. The collateral damage to other biodiversity is also noticeable; one farmer on the road to Pofadder had collected a jar of tortoise shells that he identified as belonging to victims of Pied Crows. Several other people we spoke to wondered whether the decline in raptors >

above *A Pied Crow comes in to its nest on the maintenance platform of a windmill.*

opposite *Hot pursuit. A Pied Crow dive-bombs a juvenile Yellow-billed Kite.*



WARWICK TARBOTON



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above and top *Ever opportunistic, Pied Crows are highly visible along roadsides where they patrol for the easy pickings they can glean from roadkills.*

and other bird species could be ascribed to Pied Crows taking eggs and chicks. The harassing of raptors is frequently reported. However, the impacts on biodiversity have yet to be scientifically evaluated.

While the Pied Crow appears on every pentad list in the Karoo, our initial density estimates indicate that its actual occurrence in terms of birds per square kilometre is not particularly high. They are conspicuous birds because of their size, colour, calls and habits and this creates a false impression of abundance. A murder of crows associated with a rubbish dump or roadkill can make quite an impression. But perhaps there is already a solution to the perceived crow problem unfolding, in the Karoo at least, because *'n boer maak 'n plan* (a farmer makes a plan).

**T**he Pied Crow is one of the species on the long list of 'pest' animals considered legitimate targets for reducing stock damage. Farmers were quite open about their methods of crow control. There is hardly a farmer out there who can't handle a gun, so it's rare to see a perched or relaxed crow near any farmstead: they have quickly learnt that humans equal danger in the form of a deadly bang. Given the collapse of the landline telephone infrastructure in the Karoo, the crows also increasingly nest on windmills, where it is easy for people to destroy nests or toss

out the eggs. And while illegal, the use of poison was frequently mentioned by respondents, with substances being applied to eggs, lambs' tails, other birds caught for the purpose, or even livestock carcasses where jackals and caracals are also intended targets. The unintentional bycatch from this control method is, of course, horrific: many scavenging raptors, mongooses and meerkats have been reported as collateral damage from such activities.

Pied Crows are a manifestation of a changing world, a symptom of man's impact on the planet. Condoning the control of crows is controversial and very likely unsustainable in the long term. However, if we take care of the issues that led to their increase in the first instance, then that solution is viable and can let us rest easy. It may be wishful thinking to restore a natural order of things – bringing back vultures to deal with carrion and capping carbon emissions – but if you don't like crows that is where your energy should be spent. The collapse of the telephone infrastructure that provided easy nesting sites for crows in the Karoo is already in progress. And in the meantime, if you're not a fan of crows, you'll look the other way when men head into the veld dressed in their battle kit. There are already hundreds of people murdering crows!

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