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CAPE PARROT – SA'S MOST ENDANGERED BIRD?

The Cape Parrot *Poicephalus robustus* is endemic to South Africa, where it is confined to the eastern Afromontane forests. The population has collapsed over the last 50–100 years, and today fewer than 1500 parrots remain in the wild. These two statistics combine to make the Cape Parrot Critically Endangered. Worldwide, parrots have the most threatened species of any bird family: more than 90 of the world's 332 parrot species are threatened with global extinction. More than 70 of these are threatened by habitat loss, fragmentation or degradation, and 39 species are threatened by the wild-caught bird trade, mostly illegally.

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The Cape Parrot is one of 28 parrot species threatened by both habitat loss and trade. Because the Cape Parrot is one of South Africa's most threatened endemic species, researchers at the Percy FitzPatrick Institute have taken on the challenge of helping to save this iconic species from extinction.

(Above, left) Illegal trapping for the cage-bird trade is a major and ongoing threat to wild Cape Parrots.

Pioneering work by Jack Skead of the Percy FitzPatrick Institute and Olaf Wirminghaus of the University of KwaZulu-Natal showed that Cape Parrots are strongly tied to Afromontane mistbelt yellowwood (*Podocarpus*) trees for food and nesting sites. Yellowwoods produce high-quality hardwood, much in demand for the furniture business, and have been logged intensively for more than 300 years. Continued logging by local communities and regulated harvesting by the government means that the ongoing loss of yellowwoods remains a 'clear and present danger'.

Cape Parrots are further threatened by disease – especially the airborne Psittacine Beak and Feather Disease (PBFD) – and by illegal capture for the bird trade. Historically, Cape Parrots were popular cage birds until the population collapse towards the middle of the 20th Century. Recently, there has been a resurgence in the demand for Cape Parrots in captivity fuelled by a combination of rarity and a massive rise in their market value. Of additional grave concern are several confirmed reports of full-blown PBFD symptoms in wild Cape Parrots in the Eastern Cape: several



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of these infected birds have already died. We need to act now to determine the causes of this latter problem before it is too late, because vaccines have been developed that could possibly be used to mitigate future outbreaks. One of our research aims is to capture as many Cape Parrots as possible to take blood for screening and disease testing, thus helping us understand and combat this threat.

Our post-doctoral researcher working on the Amathole Cape Parrot Project in the Eastern Cape spent five years studying the ecology of Meyer's Parrots *P. meyeri* in Botswana's Okavango Delta in preparation for undertaking this study on the Cape Parrot. Our objectives are simple. Based on sound scientific research into their feeding and breeding behaviour, coupled with an in-depth study of the condition and productivity of the remaining intact Afromontane forest patches, we aim to develop and implement a conservation plan that will protect this species into perpetuity.

We will also be taking to the air to track Cape Parrots on their long feeding forays between forest patches, coastal

Wild Cape Parrots with advanced symptoms of PBFD likely brought on by poor-quality food.

areas and 'artificial' food resources (e.g. pecan nut orchards). From our bird's eye view in the microlight, and in conjunction with our on-the-ground forest surveys, we also plan to survey forest health using high-definition photography to develop rapid, accurate and repeatable forest assessment techniques.

The plight of the Cape Parrot is immediate and serious, and we have already started this project with a researcher based in the Amathole Mountains. Some of the costs associated with the project are high, especially the aerial tracking of birds fitted with radio transmitters. The initial phase of the project is planned to last three years. Although some funding is already committed to the project, we are urgently seeking additional sponsorship of some \$70 000.



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