

knock-on effects

European Honey Buzzards on the rise

Ask any birder about the European Honey Buzzard and they will almost certainly comment on the increase in records in recent years. If you scan social media groups, you will see images of this forest raptor in the most improbable places, ranging from suburban gardens in Sandton to tiny patches of eucalyptus in the Karoo. This is a marked contrast to the large tracts of moist forest that the species inhabits during its breeding season in Europe. While this disparity is in itself interesting, adding to the story is the fact that the Honey Buzzard is declining across its European breeding range.

Given the decline of the species in Europe, researchers from the University of the Witwatersrand and Novia University of Applied Sciences, Finland were prompted to unravel what could be driving a rise in records here in southern Africa. Possible explanations were that the species forms a single breeding population that is increasing or that a change has occurred elsewhere in its non-breeding range that has caused it to move farther south. Alternatively, it could be that this scarce and cryptic migrant is being seen and recognised in greater numbers because there are now more people birding in the subregion and they have more resources at their fingertips.

The researchers first wanted to ascertain how many European Honey Buzzards have been recorded in southern Africa during the past 30 years and how these numbers have changed over time. Using a treasure trove of archived and current birding resources, including the two Southern Africa Bird Atlas Projects (SABAP), they found more than 1000 reports of European Honey Buzzard from the subregion between 1982 and 2017. The increase during this period was astounding; in the 1980s, there were two or three records per season and the species was recorded in about 20 quarter degree squares (QDSs) in southern Africa. From 2010 to



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2017, there were as many as 300 Honey Buzzard records per season and they came from more than 300 QDSs.

The next step was to analyse what lay behind this variation. The question of how birders may have affected the change seemed the best place to start. By most metrics, there seem to be many more of them than there were a decade or so ago. The number of birders subscribing to the Southern African Rare Bird News Report and participating in SABAP2 has risen annually since these projects began. However, even when Honey Buzzard records were standardised for the number of observers, the increase in records from SABAP2 in particular remained. This indicates that although part of the escalation may be linked to the burgeoning number of birders, there is more happening with this species than meets the eye.

This led the researchers to question whether something occurring farther north in the Honey Buzzard's African range was affecting the patterns observed in South Africa. From satellite tracking data, it seems probable that the majority of the Honey Buzzards seen in southern Africa breed in eastern Europe and western Russia, then migrate through the Middle East and through eastern Africa before arriving in the subregion. It then appeared most plausible that changes in the East African habitats would drive fluctuations in the southern African population of the species. And indeed, the researchers found that with

Researchers are investigating the rise in Honey Buzzard records in the subregion.

areas of forested habitat in East Africa dwindling during the past 15 years, there has been a concomitant increase in the number of Honey Buzzard records in southern Africa. This strongly supports the hypothesis that the birds are being forced farther south as a result of a lack of suitable habitat closer to their breeding grounds in Europe.

The changing conditions in its non-breeding range could have a profound effect on this raptor. Migrating to and from southern Africa is longer and more taxing than it is to and from East Africa, putting the birds at risk of failing to secure a breeding territory or a mate due to late arrival. The research has highlighted the threat and consequences of habitat loss that the Honey Buzzard and perhaps other Afrotropical migrants face during their travels. Thanks to the efforts of thousands of dedicated citizen scientists, this research has once again been able to address a central question about a fascinating bird species at a scale not previously possible.

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