

cotton on

The risk of entanglement to birds

The current global attention on the impacts of plastic pollution has some researchers worried that it is taking focus away from the threats posed by human population growth, consumerism and the climate crisis. We should not allow the concentration on plastics to distract us from these much more serious environmental challenges that will fundamentally change all our lives unless we act swiftly and decisively. Part of the engagement with the plastics problem is that the challenge is tractable and that if we improve our behaviour – because the problem lies with people, not plastics – the benefits will be enjoyed locally.

Plastics impact birds in two ways, through ingestion and entanglement. Of these, ingestion is the more serious, because it affects a larger proportion of bird populations, but entanglement causes needless injury and death to many birds. A global review recently found that entanglement has been recorded for 36 per cent of seabirds, 10 per cent of freshwater birds and 0.5 per cent of land birds. Fishing line is responsible in most instances, so fishers need to ensure they don't leave any line in the environment. Other frequent offenders include balloon ribbons, kite strings and six-pack yokes (which fortunately are banned in South Africa to avoid this problem).

But it's not only these plastic items that ensnare birds; seemingly harmless clothes threads also can cause serious injuries. This unfortunate Blacksmith Lapwing, photographed at



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Strandfontein Sewage Works outside Cape Town, has a red and black thread tangled around its left foot. To add insult to injury, a stick is intertwined with the thread, further encumbering the bird. Unless it is able to somehow free itself, the lapwing is likely to lose its foot as the thread gradually pulls tighter, cutting off circulation.

I'm sure you've all seen birds with missing feet. It is particularly common among Rock Doves, but is also frequent in gulls, shorebirds and wag-tails. Recently, we've seen several Red-winged Starlings with missing feet on the University of Cape Town campus. My impression is that such birds are more common in urban areas, but it is unclear whether this is because the cause is linked to an urban lifestyle or whether afflicted birds are better able to eke out an existence in urban areas. Both factors may well play a role.

Birds can lose feet as a result of mite infestations, bumblefoot or avian pox. More research is needed into these afflictions, because we know surprisingly little about what causes these gruesome injuries. However, at least some birds suffer the loss of a foot as



This Blacksmith Lapwing risks losing its foot after being ensnared in a tangle of red and black clothing threads.

a result of entanglement, often from seemingly benign things like threads and the artificial hair used in braids and extensions. Even litter-conscious people seldom think twice before throwing away small threads. It seems that the smaller the item, the less we consider it litter. Next time you find a loose thread on your clothes, put it in your pocket, not into the environment.

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