

The lightning bird

The hamerkop doesn't only look odd; it is an odd bird! It decorates its nest with anything from handkerchiefs to bicycle tyres, and it is believed to have magical powers, says Mark D Anderson.



Few birds have as descriptive a name as the hamerkop (literally, hammer-head). The hammer shape of its head is created by an elongated crest at the back and the bill.

Look for this "big brown job" at the edges of rivers, wetlands and dams. This is where it hunts its favourite food, tadpoles and frogs.

Hitch a hippo. Don't be surprised if you see a hamerkop hitching a ride on the back of a hippopotamus as it searches for food in the water. It also forages alongside grazing cattle and buffalo, using them to flush out grasshoppers and insects from the grass.

Bric-a-brac. The hamerkop takes about a month to build an enormous dome-sized nest with a side entrance, using sticks, leaves and other debris. Then it decorates the nest with carefully chosen bits and pieces.

Most nests are

found near water. Inside, it has one cool chamber, plastered with mud for waterproofing and insulation (all that's missing is a guest bedroom and an inside braai).

The roof is often adorned with oddities: cattle dung, bones, stones, cans, tortoise shells and even matchboxes, plastic bags and balls of wool!

In King William's Town, someone found a hamerkop nest covered in colourful handkerchiefs stolen from a nearby clothesline by Pa Hamerkop. Another nest had six bicycle tyres on top of it.


Egyptian geese, barn owls, genets, monitor lizards and bees are all regular guests. Large snakes also seek shelter here during the day, so take care if you plan to peek inside.

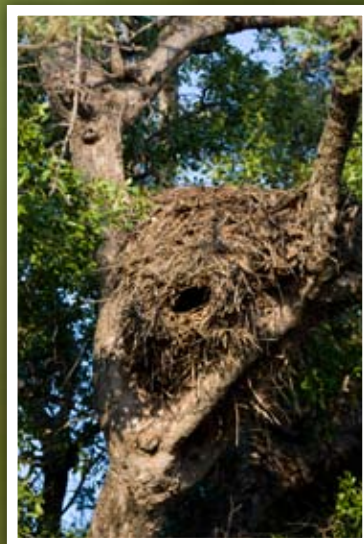
Magical powers. If you destroy its nest, a hamerkop will take revenge by sitting on the roof of your hut and calling down lightning...

This is one of many African beliefs about the hamerkop. It is also said that if you hit the bird without it dying, it is *you* who will die! And if you kill the bird, you'll lose your hair. If the bird hovers over your village, something evil is about to befall you.

In Zulu culture, someone who spends a lot of time in front of the

mirror is called *thekwane* (the Zulu name for a hamerkop), because he or she is like the bird that seemingly spends hours staring at its reflection at the water's edge.

Ironically, the superstitions have protected the hamerkop, because most people leave it well alone. Just imagine what bird numbers would have looked like today if all birds instilled such awe. 



HOMEMAKERS: A hamerkop nest is unmistakable – it is a huge mass of sticks and leaves in the fork of a tree, and it has a low side entrance.