

TOP SPOT

PICTURE & WORDS
MARK D ANDERSON



Nothing escapes this eagle eye

The martial eagle has talons larger than a man's hand and can kill an antelope. Mark D Anderson tells us more about this magnificent, threatened bird.

SPOTTED. It's easy to identify a martial eagle. The head, upper parts and breast are dark brown, similar to a black-chested snake-eagle. But the snake-eagle has unmarked underparts, mainly white underwings and bare lower legs.

Martial eagles are the largest eagles in Africa. An adult weighs up to 5 kg and has a wingspan of up to 2 ½ m! Like most other raptors, the females are larger than the males.

Home territory

The size of their territory varies from about 150 km² in the Lowveld to 800 km² on the Highveld. The birds' eagerness to defend their turf against intruders occasionally leads to aerial skirmishes in which two birds would cartwheel through the air with their talons locked – an impressive sight.

They build large nests, picking a sturdy tree, and lay a single egg. In some parts, especially the Karoo, nests are built on the pylons of large transmission lines; Eskom has to be commended for protecting these breeding birds.

Like a Stealth bomber

Martial eagles' favourite hunting tactic is to soar high in the sky,

from where they can spot their next meal from up to 6 km away. They then make a long, slanting stoop, sometimes using trees and bushes to avoid detection, and kill the prey in a high-speed impact that could knock a man off his feet. Small prey is then taken to a convenient perch, and larger kills are eaten on the ground.

They hunt reptiles (such as monitors and snakes), birds (especially helmeted guineafowl and francolins) and mammals (from mongooses to baboons).

Going, going, hopefully not gone!

The martial eagle is listed as “vulnerable” in our red data book, and numbers are declining. There are perhaps fewer than 600 pairs remaining in South Africa.

Habitat destruction, declining food sources, electrocution, and drowning in reservoirs are some of the threats to the bird's survival.

Some farmers used to shoot martial eagles, as they very occasionally kill a lamb (whence the

name *lammervanger*). Fortunately, most farmers are now aware of how important it is to protect a resident breeding pair. The birds are predators of potential “problem animals”, and thus an integral part of farm ecology.

Watch and photograph them

Martial eagles are widespread in sub-Saharan Africa (except the well-forested areas in West and Central Africa), but are thin on the ground throughout their range. They are found all over southern Africa, but are most common in the large conservation areas.

Sightings are guaranteed in the Kruger and the Kgalagadi – the latter must be the best place in Africa to photograph these raptors.

Help us help them

If it is your passion to contribute to the conservation of martial eagles in South Africa, contact André Botha of the Endangered Wildlife Trust's Birds of Prey Working Group (☎ andreb@ewt.org.za). ☐