

go!

## TOP SPOT

WORDS  
MARK D ANDERSON

# Dinner on the hoof

Nature has its own remedy for nasty bloodsucking parasites. It's called the oxpecker, says Mark D Anderson.

**T**here is no mistaking an oxpecker. It's that bird hitching a ride on that giraffe you've just spotted in the Kruger.

Oxpeckers are actually related to starlings, but there's really no other bird species like it.

**Red-billed or yellow-billed?** Apart from the obvious, an interesting difference between the two species of oxpecker is that the red-billed uses its smaller beak to "scissor" parasites from its host, while the yellow-billed oxpecker plucks the ticks off with its heavier bill. The red-billed also has a distinctive yellow ring around its eye.

**One useful bird!** Before the widespread use of toxic cattle dips, red-billed oxpeckers were found throughout the eastern part of the country as far south as Grahamstown. Now cattle farmers are encouraged to use bird-friendly dips so that these birds can return to their original range.

Red-billed oxpeckers have been reintroduced successfully in Limpopo, KwaZulu-Natal, the Eastern Cape and the Kimberley area of the Northern Cape. Some farmers now have a healthy population on their property, which helps to keep their livestock and game free of external parasites. This, in turn, stops the spread of tick-borne diseases.

### How many ticks can they put away?

A single red-billed oxpecker can eat up to 12 500 tick larvae or 100 engorged adult ticks in a day! That's a pretty effective grooming service for the host animal. But sometimes the bird gets carried away and will also feed on blood from an open wound.

**Where can I see them?** Red-billed oxpeckers are common in the Kruger and conservation areas in Limpopo and northern KwaZulu-Natal. Yellow-billed oxpeckers can only be seen in the Kruger; northern Botswana, especially the Okavango; and the western parts of Zimbabwe, like Hwange National Park.

During the day, oxpeckers clamber around their host animal's back, but you might also spot them around water holes which they visit to bathe and drink. At night, they roost communally in dead trees.

**Early warning device.** If you are on a bush walk, especially in big-game country, it's useful to know the trills and whistles of the oxpecker. A flock taking to the air, calling as they fly away, is an indication that there could be danger ahead.

**Know the score.** To find out more about the reintroduction of oxpeckers in your area, visit

☞ [www.ewt.org.za](http://www.ewt.org.za) or e-mail

☞ [oxpecker@ewt.org](mailto:oxpecker@ewt.org).



PICTURE MARK D ANDERSON



PICTURE ALBIE VENTER

**BIG BROTHER.** Red-billed oxpeckers are co-operative breeders. Up to seven helpers work together to feed the nestlings of a single pair. They nest in natural tree holes lined with fur from their host animal. You can see a juvenile bird sitting between the giraffe's ears.