

# Happy hour at the waterhole

The “kelkiewyn” call of the Namaqua sandgrouse is one of the signature tunes of a new day in the Northern Cape and Namibia, says Mark D Anderson.

**M**uch like some men who pop in at their local pub for happy hour every day, sandgrouse need to visit their nearest waterhole almost daily. One of my most memorable experiences was watching Namaqua and Burchell’s sandgrouse come in to drink near Groblershoop in the Northern Cape. It was silent at first, but then the birds arrived in their thousands (we estimated there were 17 500 of them). Their calls filled the clear Kalahari air for a full 90 minutes.

**Like clockwork.** Namaqua sandgrouse have a rigid daily schedule. The first rays of morning light see them rousing and preparing to flock, first to their favourite sand-dusting site, then to the regular drinking site, and finally on to a feeding site. They visit their waterholes about two to three hours after sunrise.

The double-banded sandgrouse, which you’ll see in woodland areas and Etosha, has a different routine. It usually drinks at dusk, announcing its arrival with its lovely whistling call. It is so regular in its drinking time that you can almost set your watch by it.

**Model fathers.** Unlike the average bar fly, male sandgrouse make very good fathers. The male birds soak up water in their belly feathers to take to their chicks,


up to 80km away in the desert, to quench their thirst. Belly-wetting is a sure sign that the sandgrouse are breeding, so impress your family and friends with this knowledge when next you visit the Kgalagadi or Etosha.

**Nomads.** Sandgrouse are one of only two bird families that feed exclusively on seeds, so they move around a lot to take advantage of good rains. Favoured are protein-rich seeds from legumes, annual plants that respond to good rains.

**By committee.** This bird is a bit of a design oddity – it has the wings of a dove and the body of a francolin, but is in fact most closely related to a wader.

**Dark skies.** Namaqua sandgrouse were once so prolific it’s said a flock could blank out the sun. For various reasons, their numbers have dwindled. Hunter-gatherers and early settlers killed them for their meat, and they are favoured by wing-shooters because of their regular



habits and fast flying. Ironically, the eradication of the black-backed jackal in Bushmanland has seen other small predators such as the yellow mongoose and snakes proliferate, which is bad news for these ground-nesting birds. 



**CALL OF THE KALAHARI.** A mixed flock of Namaqua and Burchell’s sandgrouse arrive at a Kalahari waterhole to drink. You can distinguish the loud “ki-ki-vee” (“kelkiewyn”) flight call of the Namaqua and the staccato “chok-lit” of the Burchell’s sandgrouse. The pretty double-banded sandgrouse (inset) is mostly silent in flight.