

## TOP SPOT

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PICTURE CHRIS VAN ROOYEN



# Africa calling

The call of the African fish-eagle is one of the most distinctive bird sounds of the African wilds. Did you know, asks **Mark D Anderson**, that it can also tell us whether an ecosystem is healthy or not?

**Wee-ah, hyo-hyo-hyo.** The African fish-eagle's evocative call carries far and stirs excitement in us because when you hear it you know you are in a wild place.

The female, which has a deeper voice, is usually the first to call, with her mate often answering in duet. When the eagle calls from its perch or in flight, it flings its head right back.

**They're everywhere.** African fish-eagles are found across sub-Saharan Africa, except in deserts and mountains.

They are very common in the

Okavango and along the edge of Lake Kariba, but you might also hear them on a river such as the Breede in the Western Cape.

They eat mainly fish, but they have also been seen eating frogs, ducks, flamingos, red-billed queleas, rats, termites and even monkeys.

Fish-eagles nest in the fork of a large tree, and breed during the winter months. The female lays one to four eggs, but usually only one or two chicks survive.

When they grow up, the young birds leave their parent's territory and move off to distant pastures.

They sometimes gather in numbers at large wetlands. An impressive 189 were once recorded together in the Okavango.

**Nature's bellwether.** A study is under way in South Africa using African fish-eagles to find out how healthy our wetlands are. Scientists are taking blood samples from fish-eagle chicks along the Vaal and Breede rivers (and will soon do so along the Olifants) to measure pollution levels.

The higher up the food chain an animal is, the more pollutants are likely to collect in its blood.

As part of the study, fish-eagle nestlings are also being fitted with coloured, numbered wing-tags to help ornithologists track their movements and survival.

**How can I get involved?** If you're a keen angler or spend a lot of time near dams and rivers, you might see an African fish-eagle nest or spot an eagle that has been tagged. If you do, send your information to André Botha at the Endangered Wildlife Trust's Birds of Prey Working Group.

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