


TOP SPOT

WORDS & PICTURE
MARK D ANDERSON

Something to crow about



LANDLINE INCLUDED. These two pied crows found the cross-arm of a telephone pole a convenient place to build a nest.

When you travel on the open road, you can't help noticing crows — perched on telephone poles next to large, untidy nests, or feeding on roadkill and leftovers at picnic sites. **Mark D Anderson** explains why there are so many of them.

Crows belong to a group of birds least likely to be affected by climate change — here's why:

What's on their menu?

À la carte. Crows eat literally anything, both plant and animal! They have been seen catching small birds in flight, gleaning ticks from livestock, feeding on snakes and even hunting flying termites.

The road café. With more cars on the road comes more road kill, which makes easy pickings for Cape and pied crows.

Farm fresh. Crows also like farm crops and never turn a beak up at mealies or prickly pears, much to the dismay of farmers.

Where do they live?

Huis, paleis... Crows are happy to nest on even the most rickety of man-made structures, including

windmills and utility poles. This has made it possible for them to live and breed in areas where there are no cliffs or trees — even cities — and consequently their ranges have expanded.

The good...

Clean-up crew. As scavengers, crows have a valuable role to play. By eating dead animals they stop the spread of disease. In fact, some scavenging raptors, such as the Cape vulture and the tawny eagle, may use crows to locate food.

...and the bad

Pesky critters. Farmers don't like crows much because they are believed to occasionally feed on small livestock.

They're also a huge headache for Eskom: They build nests on electricity pylons, and sometimes

incorporate pieces of wire into their stick nests, which could cause short circuits.

Food fight. Crows compete for the same food as raptors. They may also take over their nests, and sometimes aggressively mob eagles and other birds of prey.

Tortoise troubles. In the Western Cape, white-necked ravens regard padloper as a delicacy, which is bad news for the tortoises.

Counting crows

There are three indigenous species in southern Africa: the pied crow, the Cape (black) crow and the white-necked raven.

In 1972, a fourth species was added to the list, when the house crow was introduced to Durban from India. There's now also a small population of them on the Cape Flats.

