

WORDS & PICTURES
MARK D ANDERSON

Tar & feathers

Road-side birding is a great way to pass the time on a long road trip, says Mark D Anderson.



Birdwatching from a car is a lot of fun, especially along roads in our national parks and nature reserves, and it allows the young, the old, and the not-so-mobile to take part in one of the world's fastest-growing pastimes.

Road verges are an ideal habitat for birds because these areas are

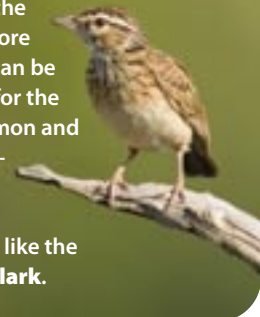
generally not grazed by livestock and get extra rainfall in the form of runoff from the road. So there's a ready supply of food such as seeds, insects and rodents, as well as a range of handy perches supplied by Eskom, Telkom and farmers.

Many species are fairly easy to identify, such as raptors, hornbills, gamebirds and the brightly coloured rollers. But it's a lot more

challenging to pin down an LBJ (little brown job), especially if you are travelling at speed!

1 Play a game

Divide the passengers into two teams and see who can identify the most bird species on their side of the road. More points can be scored for the uncommon and difficult-to-identify species, like the **sabota lark**.



3 Keep an eye out for the really big guys

With their large size and habit of perching on telephone and electricity poles, raptors are fairly easily identified from a car. Some of the more common species are black-shouldered kites, lesser kestrels, amur falcons, lanner falcons and steppe buzzards.

In Bushmanland, keep an eye out for the mighty **martial eagle**.

In the Magoebaskloof area you should see long-crested eagles. In the Kalahari, watch for pygmy falcons near sociable weaver nests.

On the Highveld you might be lucky to spot a marsh owl.

Want to find out more? The Northern Cape's "Kalahari Raptor Route" map gives a description of the raptors that can be seen along specific routes (the maps are available from the Northern

Cape Tourism Authority ☎ 053 833 1434; 📧 northerncape_tourism@telkom.sa.net).



2 Close down the road-kill café

Speeding motorists sadly kill many birds on roads, with some of the most frequent road casualties being **spotted eagle-owls**, barn owls and lesser kestrels that feed on roadkill.

In parts of South Africa, motorists are warned about collision hot spots in an attempt to reduce casualties. One of the problems is that other animals also get killed when they scavenge on these dead birds and mammals. (If you can, throw any road kill over the fence,

but be careful on busy roads so you too don't become a statistic!)

When you handle a dead bird, check for a metal ring and report your findings to SAFRING at the University of Cape Town by writing to 📧 safring@adu.uct.ac.za.



4 Get involved

If you are a serious birdwatcher, you might wish to keep a data-sheet to record your raptor sightings, including the odometer reading or GPS co-ordinates, date, time, species, age and behaviour. Send the information to André Botha at the Birds of Prey Working Group (📧 andreb@ewt.org.za).

Twice a year, the national Co-ordinated Avifaunal Roadcount Project counts large terrestrial birds (such as blue cranes and northern black korhaans) along specified routes. If you'd like to get involved, contact Donella Young (📧 Donella.Young@uct.ac.za) or visit 🌐 www.avian-demographyunit.org.

Also check birds for rings and wing tags, as more than 1 000 blue cranes have been marked with unique colour-rings, southern pale chanting goshawks have been marked with engraved colour-rings, and eagles and vultures have been marked with wing tags. Once again, report this information to 📧 safring@adu.uct.ac.za. 📧