

Editorial

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Since ancient times, birds have been associated with aesthetics. Bird plumage and bird song have become part and parcel of the human cultural heritage. Together with humanity's capacity to identify and ascribe a large variety of symbolic meanings to birds, the characteristic features of bird species as well as their association with natural habitats, and their diverse roles in the food chain and biosphere, make them one of the most significant and awe-inspiring of cosmic phenomena.

In Africa, birds range from the large birds of prey like the African fish eagle with its remarkable call—often called 'the voice of Africa'—through the large variety of birds such as pelicans, blue cranes, secretary birds, and owls to smaller seagulls, parrots and the wide variety of finch. This diversity is matched by an equally rich variety of traditions, legends, stories, anecdotes, and symbolic meanings ascribed to birds and emblems portraying birds. Birds form one of the rich sources of our global ecosystems and ecology, also significantly impacting on humanity's creative and imaginative engagements and interactions with nature.

Due to the excesses of non-eco-friendly industrialisation, a variety of poisons impacting on natural health, and humanity's encroachment on the environment, many bird species are threatened with extinction. In a study released in May 2009, Birdlife International, on behalf of the International Union for Conservation of Nature, revealed that 1,227 species of birds—12% of bird life on the planet—are now threatened with extinction. An additional 192 bird species are on the critically endangered list¹. As a very significant part of our global environment, birds and the habitat of birds need to be

¹ See <http://www.arkive.org/news/20090514-more-birds-threatened-with-extinction-than-ever-before.html>.

protected²—the future of the jackass penguin is a case in point³. And in spite of conflict of opinion between global warming denialists, sceptics, and green advocacy it is an incontrovertible fact that industrialisation and different forms of pollution have severely impacted animal life, including bird life habitats and bird health over the last few hundred years⁴. In the South African context, we need to consider the variety and rich heritage of birdlife we accommodate, and are responsible for⁵.

In addition to the literary studies of birds and bird life it is especially in the interdisciplinary biodiversity domain that critical reflection on the rich heritage of birds and bird life is important for human life and prosperity. The celebration of *Birds: In and Out of Literature* makes a not insignificant contribution to the continuation of awareness raising in this direction.

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² See http://www.wildwatch.com/book_reviews/birds-2/the-eskom-red-data-book-of-birds-of-south-africa-lesotho-and-swaziland for more information on threatened bird species and related critical perspectives in southern Africa.

³ See <http://www.catalogs.com/info/bestof/top-10-most-endangered-species-on-earth>: 'Jackass Penguins face a myriad of threats, from oil spills and pollution to a dwindling seal food supply, which makes this penguin prey rather than peer. Once the most common sea bird in South Africa, the Jackass Penguin is one of the 10 most endangered species on earth'.

⁴ On November 3 2009, IUCN revealed that more than a third of the animal species of 47,677 assessed thus far are threatened with extinction. See <http://www.arkive.org/news/20091103-2009-iucn-red-list-of-threatened-species.html>.

⁵ Of the +/- 850 bird species recorded in South Africa, about 725 are resident or annual visitors, and 50 of these are endemic or near-endemic and can only be seen in South Africa. Apart from resident birds, South Africa hosts a number of intra-African migrants such as cuckoos and kingfishers, as well as birds from the Arctic, Europe, Central Asia, China and Antarctica during the year' (see http://www.sa-venues.com/wildlife/south_africa_birdlife.htm).