

Oxpeckers, Ignore them at your peril

Afrikaans- *renostervoël* Zulu- *isihlalanyathi* Tsonga- *mayanda*

Two species of oxpecker occur in the Kruger National Park, namely the redbilled oxpecker and the yellowbilled oxpecker. The former is common and widespread in the Kruger, while the latter is only really considered common in the Northern parts of the Park. Where the two species occur together, they can be separated by their calls. The yellowbilled's call is much harsher than its redbilled cousin, similar in many ways to a speckled mousebird, a common garden bird in many provinces. Nyalaland is a good trail to see this bird. They are often present on giraffe and buffalo on the entrance road to the trail camp.

Both species attend a variety of host animals and provide valuable services such as parasite removal and an early warning system for disturbances. When trailing in the bush, one must at all costs become attuned to the calls of these birds, which helps to locate game and to avoid dangerous encounters with Rhino and Buffalo. These large herbivores are prolific on the three southern trails: Napi; Wolhuter and Bushman. Once the animal has been identified calculated decisions can be taken whether to approach the animal if deemed safe to do so, or to leave the animal alone. Bushman trail has ideal 'safe' sites in the form of rocky ledges, boulders and dongas. Given a disciplined approach, rewards can be rich in this regard.

Oxpeckers locate their hosts early in the morning, making it imperative to note where these birds came from and where they land. Ticks concentrate on specific parts of the host animal and sometimes feeding opportunities are just not available, forcing the birds to move to an alternative host. Dense vegetation especially in the summer months effectively means that you never know what animal to expect. The answer however can sometimes be worked out if you are in possession of fresh tracks or you are in a specific habitat type. Kudu for example favour wooded hillsides and lone buffalo dense reed beds. Larger than normal aggregations of oxpeckers suggests that breeding herds of buffalo are present. The sense of anticipation is both a thrill and a challenge and one needs to be constantly on the lookout for these birds. The responsibilities of the ranger staff are immense, as the safety of the guests is of paramount importance.

Highlights in this regard are many, however some will always come to mind. We were coming to the end of a morning trail on Bushman when it was particularly humid and uncomfortable. The

protestations of a young boy to his father regarding the heat and the imminent end of the walk were weighing heavily on my mind. This could be a dangerous distraction, however spending many years in the bush teaches one tremendous powers of attention and focus. The veldt was lush and in summer the round leaf teak very thick. Higher up in these thickets oxpeckers called, presumably because of our presence. The result was the discovery of two black rhino cows lying down, taking refuge from the sun. This 'focus' won us the chance of having a privileged view of two very rare animals, and most importantly avoided a potentially dangerous situation.

There are many times when these birds are simply perched in a tree or are just passing overhead. To not take notice of these birds every move is to your disadvantage and detriment. When walking in areas with potentially dangerous game, one needs every bit of help one can get.