Common myna invades Kruger: from unlikely invader to growing concern

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THE FIRST FOUR COMMON MYNAS WERE SEEN IN KRUGER IN 2000. SURELY COMMON MYNA WOULD NOT INVADE KRUGER? FAST FORWARD 20 YEARS AND SUDDENLY THERE ARE MORE THAN 60 NEW OBSERVATIONS, TOTALLING MORE THAN 300 BIRDS.... THEY CAN INVADE KRUGER

Photo of the common myna (Acridotheres tristis, G. Winterflood; Wikimedia-commons CC-BY-SA-4.0). Common mynas are increasing fast, despite initial hopes that they will not easily adapt to a life in the wilds of Kruger. 300 birds were seen in the park between 2000 and 2020.

Common mynas (*Acridotheres tristis*), native to south-east Asia, are a familiar sight in South Africa and many places around the world. Typically associated with humans and preferring urban areas, their presence around the Phalaborwa area from the mid-1990s marked the beginning of an unexpected trend. More sightings were soon reported in other areas bordering the Kruger National Park such as Nelspruit, Hazyview, Hoedspruit, Komatipoort and Malelane. Initially, the likelihood of mynas invading Kruger was considered highly unlikely. With less than 1% of Kruger's 2 million hectares considered suitable for mynas, there appeared to be limited suitable habitat in the park. Additionally, it was expected that strong competition from native birds and predators would contribute to the low likelihood of successful invasion.

However, in 2000, a pair of mynas were observed in Talamati, and shortly thereafter two birds were seen at the Lower Sabie tourist camp (Fig. 1). The mynas at Talamati most likely spread into Kruger from Hoedspruit (approximately 60 km away), and from Komatipoort to Lower Sabie camp (approximately 26 km). The perception that the introduction of mynas into Kruger was unlikely, or at most, would only occur in very low numbers seemed to hold as only eight sightings, totalling 14 birds, had been recorded by 2010. However, this was just the common lag phase generally displayed by alien species starting to expand, and the numbers of mynas exploded in the next decade. Between 2010 and 2020, 64 unique observations had been reported, with the total number of mynas reaching just over 300 in total. Notably, of those unique observations 38 were reported between 2018 and 2020, accounting for 66% of the total number of mynas sighted in Kruger.

Mynas are clearly going to become a feature in Kruger, and ongoing surveillance, monitoring and management will be required to limit their numbers as far as possible. While this is more easily done at staff and tourist infrastructure, perhaps the bigger and more important question is will mynas spread into natural areas and what are the potential impacts?

In their native range, common mynas naturally occupy open woodlands, but they also seem to be able to successfully adapt to various environmental conditions, exhibiting a wide habitat niche ranging from grasslands, plantation forestry, flood plains, and desert oases to urban areas and cultivated land.

Will mynas be able to adapt to Kruger's savanna system? Simply answered, it appears so. In 2000 already, mynas showed that they could fly long distances to reach Satara and Lower Sabie. Now mynas are common in Letaba, Mopani and Shingwedzi, and a quarter of the birds are nesting or feeding in natural areas. Individual mynas have been seen 15–20 km from any staff or tourist infrastructure in natural areas, which are likely providing a suitable environment for them. Additionally, there have been sightings of potentially resident birds, typically close to permanent water sources (Stapelkop Dam) or seasonal water sources (Klopperfontein). Thus, dispersal is clearly not a barrier to their spread across Kruger.

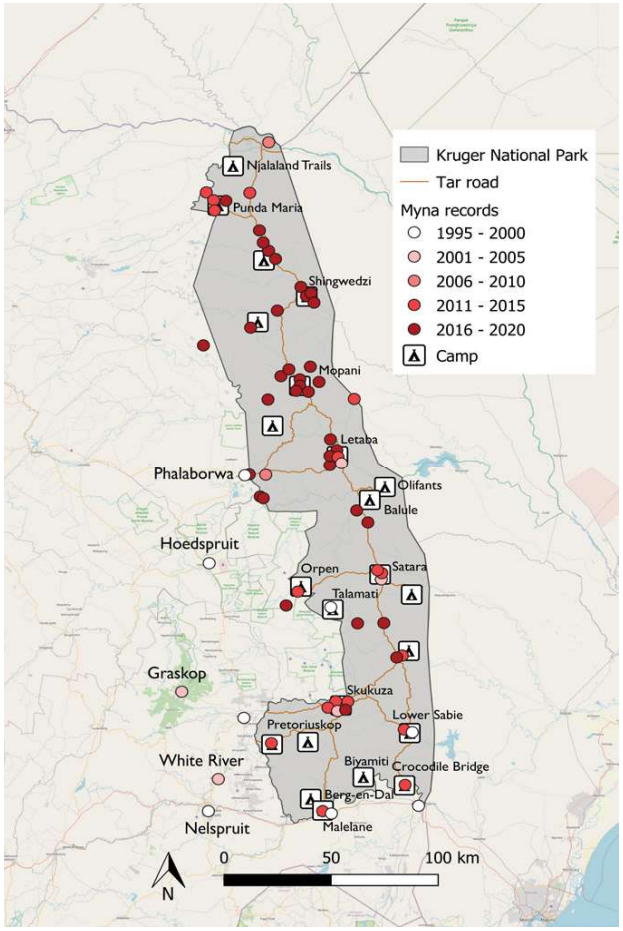

Figure 1. Map of Kruger National Park showing the distribution of common mynas and when they were first observed. While the first observations were from Lower Sabie and Talamati, the highest number of records occur around Letaba, Mopani and Shingwedzi (figure reproduced from Pyšková et al. 2022)

Interesting observations showed the common mynas' ability to utilise a variety of food sources, such as feeding on insects disturbed alongside grazing buffalo and impala and foraging together with cattle egrets in-between grazing zebra. Several reports described the mynas visiting and foraging around red-billed buffalo weavers' nests, breeding in them, and one record described mynas harassing the weavers around their nests at Stapelkop Dam. It is unlikely that the behaviour displayed to date will impact native birds at a landscape scale across Kruger, but at a local scale where native species are harassed or their nesting sites are taken, it may lead to negative impacts.

Pyšková K, Pyšek P & **Foxcroft LC**. 2022. Introduction and invasion of common myna (*Acridotheres tristis*) in Kruger National Park, South Africa: still time for action? Biological Invasions 24: 2291–2300.