



Colonial Birds—Heron, egrets, and cormorants in your tree!

The Happy Event

In winter and spring, colonial nesting birds such as herons, egrets, ibis, spoonbills, and cormorants start preparing for the nesting season as they select mates, build nests, lay eggs, and rear chicks. When this happens in a big tree in your garden, this happy event is often welcomed by the homeowner and neighbours. The sight of these elegant birds flying in and out, their mating rituals and nest building all provide great joy for nature lovers.

The habit of nesting in groups is believed to provide better survival against predators. To this end, a large tree is required that is also near to a reliable food source. The Sedgefield Island provides several appropriate sites.

The Honeymoon is Over

However, the 'happy event' can soon lose its attraction. These heronries often become problematic to the humans residing in the area. The guano's smell is offensive and permeates a large area surrounding the heronry. The parent birds are noisy, and their calls begin at dawn and interrupt human sleep. The calling is incessant throughout the day.

ARE HERONRIES JUST FOR HERONS?

The founders of a nesting colony are often herons and their cousins, the egrets. (Both herons and egrets are called 'reiers' in Afrikaans and share similar names in Dutch and German.) So, it is quite appropriate to call it a heronry, despite all the guests that move in.

The chicks are messy eaters and quantities of their food (particularly fish) is dropped to the ground where it attracts scavengers, rots in the heat of the day and adds to the offensive smell surrounding the heronry.

The question always arises at this point, 'What can we do to fix this problem?'

The short answer is that you cannot chase them or interfere with them once nesting has commenced and until all young have flown the nest. The longer answer is to approach the Island Conservancy for support and assistance if the birds have taken residence. You can also do something to prevent it from happening to you.

The Conservancy can Provide Support

We are fortunate to live on an island surrounded by a national park that is known for its exceptional birdlife. This singular privilege comes with conservation and legal responsibilities. Our objective is to make human lives easier while ensuring that the birds' breeding season has a successful outcome.

The Conservancy will monitor bird behaviour, quickly identifying where the birds will probably be nesting. Once we see where they are setting up their heronry, we start interaction with all the people living nearby, as well as property owners, in the case of rentals and holiday accommodation.



We will:

- Make sure that you know your rights as well as what is required of you by the applicable legislation and good conservation practice. In the Western Cape it is illegal to disturb protected species, including all the colonial nesting species—see [The Law regarding Birds](#) further down.
- We will monitor breeding colonies on our island and protecting them as far as possible from disturbance. Interference in a heronry could precipitate a decrease in nesting effort and nesting success. Too much human activity in the vicinity of a heronry may cause birds to abandon their eggs and young.
- Provide or manage physical support for cleaning up mess and managing smells.
- Interact with the authorities, mainly Knysna Municipality and Cape Nature, to ensure that all our actions meet their requirements.

CONTACT THE ISLAND CONSERVANCY:

- Lawrence Boatwright, 083 376 7846
- Beryl Stiles, 073 155 0859
- Mary Hunter, 082 900 8680

What Can I do to Clean Up My Property?

If the nest trees are on the verge outside your property or overhang the verge, the municipality have provided excellent clean-up teams in the past. These municipal teams will remove the offensive materials and spread lime or pine gel on municipal property, to reduce the acidity and odour. This service can be coordinated by contacting the Conservancy on the numbers above.

Although we will coordinate communication with Knysna municipality, *the municipality does not offer services on private property*. To keep your garden clean odour-free, we suggest the following:

- Sprinkling agricultural lime on guano reduces the acidity and may save your lawn or plants.
- Rake up and bag the guano and spilled food regularly to reduce the smell and risk of infection.
- Apply Pine Gel to the area to fight the odour and as a mild disinfectant.

It is advised to wear protective clothing when dealing with any animal waste.

How You can Help

Luckily, the Island has many avid dog walkers and hikers that can be encouraged to monitor increased nesting activity around a specific tree. Please report this to the Conservancy.

Explaining to neighbours what the Conservancy is doing and why is very important and has been neglected in the past. By promoting conservation, assisting with environmental initiatives, and inviting local people to discuss and cooperate in future policies – the conservancy is taking up a responsible role in society. Thanks to this people are starting to see the conservancy as a benefit – and not a burden.

Working with people and building long term relationships with them involves more than saying hello to each other every day over the fence!



How to Avoid the Problem Altogether

Colonial birds are genetically programmed to seek out the highest trees as nesting places. On The Island, these are gums (eucalyptus), followed by pines and number of smaller trees such as syringas and pin oaks. What is immediately obvious is that all these trees are aliens that do not really belong here at all.

You will have noticed too that the natural vegetation in this area is all relatively low. The typical coastal scrub that we see in the Enviro Gardens is only about 4m tall. This is also typical in all the low-lying areas along this part of the coast.

The solution lies in removing the lure of the tall trees by one of two means:

1. By removing tall alien trees completely. If you have a big gum or pine on your property, have it felled, thereby reducing the alien tree population by one, or
2. By topping tall trees on your property to the height of the endemic coastal shrub. This will make them less of an attraction to the birds, which will hopefully move to natural vegetation further away from humans.

The remedy sounds harsh because we all love the stately, huge gum and pine trees on the Island. However, removing the ones closest to houses will leave many of our favourites, such as those at the Fish Eagle common, the 'Owl Tree' and at the Bird Sanctuary. All will not be lost.

This solution supports bigger-picture conservation by removing nesting species from human areas, thereby protecting them from interference or even death. Cape Nature suggested this solution and supports it.

However, many of the existing tall trees that are close to houses are on the roadside verges and are Knysna Municipal property. Your Conservancy committee is in discussions with the municipality to reach agreement on how these will be handled.

The Conservancy, together with SAN Parks and the landowner, constructed the Bird Islands in the Perdespruit with the idea of attracting the birds away from the suburb. Whether the Bird Islands will succeed will probably only be apparent in the next breeding season, but they need maintenance, some modifications and filling with new branches. All of this is on the Conservancy's to-do list and will be getting attention.

Which Species Breed Here?

The species we commonly see breeding here include:

- Herons
 - Goliath Heron—we are very fortunate to have this, the biggest South African heron, nesting on the Island. There are very few nesting pairs in the Western Cape, and we have at least one of them!
 - Black-headed heron
 - Grey heron
 - Black-crowned night heron—not a frequent sight at the heronries but this small heron nested in de la Rey Street recently.
- Egrets
 - Little egret
- Spoonbills



- African Darter
- Cormorants
 - Reed cormorant

The Law regarding Birds

Q. What does the law say about just chopping down trees where the birds are nesting?

A. Interfering with nesting birds in any way is covered by the Nature Conservation Ordinance (Ordinance), No. 19 of 1974. In the Ordinance, the word ‘hunting’ is used to cover a wide range of activities, including cutting down trees where birds are nesting. The Ordinance definition of “hunt”: in relation to any wild animal means by any means whatsoever to hunt or search for, to kill, capture or attempt to kill or capture, or to pursue, follow or drive with intent to kill or capture, or to shoot at, poison, be in wait for **or wilfully disturb**.

According to Section 27 (1)(b) of the Nature Conservation Ordinance (Ordinance), No. 19 of 1974, it is a criminal offence to hunt a protected wild animal without being in possession of a permit authorizing it to do so. The maximum penalty for said offence, according to Sec. 86(1)(c) is R80 000.00 (eighty thousand Rand), or two years imprisonment, or both the fine and imprisonment, and a further fine amount of up to three times the commercial value of the fauna involved.

The Ordinance definition of “wild animal”: means any live vertebrate or invertebrate animal (including the egg or spawn of any such animal but excluding any ostrich used for farming purposes and the egg thereof) belonging to a non-domestic species and includes any such animal which is kept or has been born in captivity.

Q. Are the herons and egrets protected?

A. When it comes to whether a bird is protected or not, the answer is quite simple. Schedules 1 and 2 of the Ordinance make it clear that **all birds are protected or endangered**, with a few exceptions that are mostly invasive species such as European starlings and mynahs. This means that all the nesting colonial birds we find around Sedgefield are protected.

The Ordinance definition of “protected wild animal”: means any species of wild animal specified in Schedule 2 (of the Ordinance) or Appendix II of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora, Washington, 1973; provided that it shall not include any species of wild animal specified in such Appendix and Schedule 1.

Thus, you could check if the species of bird appears on Schedule 2 of the ordinance, and Appendix II of CITES, to determine if it is a Protected Species, or Schedule 1 of the ordinance, and Appendix I of CITES, to determine if it is an Endangered Species. Any bird not appearing on above lists would be unprotected.

Q. What if I have a hunting licence?

A. It is also important to refer to the annual hunting notice, where allowance is given for people in possession of a hunting licence, to hunt the species which appear on the hunting notice, with the landowner’s permission.

However, this would not be allowed in a built-up residential area like Sedgefield Island.

Q. Who enforces the law and regulations?



A. The primary enforcement agency for the Nature Conservation Ordinance is Cape Nature. When heronries fall wholly or partially on municipal property, such as trees on street-side verges, the Knysna Municipality ensures that municipal bylaws are enforced.