

‘Birds always do more good than harm’

We met Nico and Ella Myburgh through *Village Life* magazine, and were fortunate to have Nico as our birding contributor for almost six years – he was the doyen of South African bird photographers, and had recorded a total of 680 avian species. To get all those perfect shots took dedication, a love for nature and a vast knowledge of his subject – and sometimes risk of injury.

Oom Nico could recall the when, where and how of virtually each photo in his collection of 9000 slides. When we once showed him a list of 106 different species of local birds, he quickly skimmed through it and said there were two which he didn't have!

Nico's early childhood days on an apricot farm at Wellington were often spent exploring the veld and wooded banks of the Slang River with his companion, Kassie. His father taught them not to disturb birds, as “birds always did more good than harm”. Nico's interest in birding started developing in earnest after they had moved to the family farm Klawervlei on the Eerste River in the Stellenbosch district, when he was 10. Members of the Cape Town Bird Club regularly came to view and explore the rich birdlife on the vlei on the farm.

Amongst the Club members were names well known in birding circles, such as Jack McCleod, Prof Gerry Broekhuizen, Dirk Uys, Gavin Lestranger (the first to take bird photographs in colour) and Peter Steyn, with whom Nico shared almost all his photographic experiences. The Cape Town Photographic Club also visited. Nico waded chest-deep amongst the reeds looking for nests with them, and started to take an interest in photographing birds himself. His first purchase, a Kodak Retinette, allowed him only to photograph birds' nests. In 1966 followed his first “real” camera, but Nico found it necessary to saw off the lens to fit bellows for close-ups.

After finishing school, Nico farmed until 1973, when he sold Klawervlei. At age 50 he became curator of the Helderberg Nature Reserve, first with Dougie Wood, but later on his own. And it was here that many of his most memorable photographs were taken, including one of a Buffspotted Flufftail for which he waited in a hide for a total of 118 hours. He was due to retire at age 65, but eventually only managed to get away when he was 68. He and Ella went on a two-month holiday to KwaZulu-Natal, but then stayed for almost eight years on a farm near Eshowe with 321 bird species to photograph. “One



could photograph 120 species without leaving your house,” Nico recalled.

Ella said she had to get him away from there, or he would have broken his neck. “The most interesting birds were in the highest trees,” she recalled. She described one particularly precarious hide Nico had built, which could only be reached by balancing on a ladder between branches, with one hand holding the camera, the other the flash unit. When she warned him that he would fall and kill himself, he countered: “What a wonderful way to die!”

The picture that probably required the most effort and ingenuity, was that of the Palm-nut Vulture. The bird nests in the crown of the raffia palm, which is over 25 metres tall, with long, razor-sharp fronds. Nico and Hugh Chittenden found four sections of borehole lining and welded it together, with rods welded on the side as steps. This was carted to the swampy area under the palm tree, and eventually they enlisted help and managed to hoist it into an upright position and secure it with cables to emdoni trees. When Nico immediately climbed up the pole to look at the nest, the eagle was still sitting there, undisturbed by the commotion. The photographs taken from this perch and another hide, were the first of this species nesting, and was published in the first issue of *SA Birds & Birding*.

Nico and Ella seemed to know something about not only every bird, but also about plants and other creatures. Enquire about the Black Harrier, and he recounted how the bird returned to the Stanford area after encroaching Port Jacksons had been removed. Mention the Paper Nautilus, and they would tell you about the thousands that washed ashore at Macassar in 1989, and how the female uses the shell as a sail. Talk about the rare Marsh Rose, and it transpired that Nico and Ella had been up Pringle Peak for the first photographs of the rediscovered species.

“Nico Myburgh thinks like a bird. That is why his photographs have an innovative quality that few can match,” wrote well-known birding writer and photographer Peter Steyn in one of his books.

Nico Myburgh's photographs have been published widely, including about 100 in *The Complete Book of South African Birds*. In 1994 and again in 2004 Sasol sponsored a calendar with his pictures. Birdlife SA honoured him in 2008 with its Eagle Award for his lifetime contribution to the appreciation and conservation of birds.

We have known Nico and Ella for seven years, but they have enriched our lives in many ways. They were fond of visiting our home in Stanford where, thanks to their inputs, we have established a bird-friendly garden. Nico and Ella not only taught us about birds, but about how all the creatures in Nature are dependent on one another. We shall always remember Nico as our guide into Nature, and we shall miss him as one would miss one's father. He was one of a kind, and touched the lives of many.

– *Maré & Annalize Mouton, 20 January 2011*