

AFRICAN GRASS-OWL - Future in Flames?



We stood helplessly watching a pair of African Grass-Owls (*Tyto capensis*) fleeing from the ferocious flames as their nesting site was completely destroyed in a matter of minutes. This was the scene in Kyalami on Friday afternoon, 8 November 2013. A fire that was mysteriously started on the vacant land next door to the nesting site could have serious repercussions for the future of the Grass-Owls in Kyalami.

The nesting site has been active for over eight years and the property owners purchased this piece of land just to ensure the protection of the owls. These habitat specialists require very dense grass in order to build their nests and tunnels in which they spend their days. Sites like this one are becoming fewer and fewer as development increases and suitable habitat is destroyed. In addition to the negative impact of development there is the added pressure from dogs and cats which will chase or kill these secretive creatures.



Left: African Grass-Owl narrowly escapes raging fire.

Above: African Grass-Owl hovering over a nest in Imerata grass (*Imperata cylindrical*).

In nature these veld fires are an integral part of the ecosystem and they happen naturally every couple of years when the conditions are right. This process normally happens before spring which allows for optimal vegetation regrowth. African Grass-Owls usually have several nesting sites in quite a large range so that when a natural burn occurs the owls simply move to another nearby nesting site until the burned area recovers (usually takes about 2 years). The problem that these owls are facing in Gauteng is that their nesting areas are dwindling and the fires are happening so frequently that the owls are forced to move out of the areas completely in search of suitable habitat and sufficient food.



Above: African Grass-Owl landing in one of its tunnels in attempt to escape the fire.

Right: African Grass-Owl moves off in search of a new nesting site.



In Kyalami several volunteers and members of **GEKCO** (Greater Kyalami Conservancy; <http://gekco.co.za/>) work hard to raise awareness about the biodiversity that occurs in the area and do a lot to try protect it. While most people in the area share the common desire to preserve the environment, there is unfortunately a lot of pressure from developers wanting to destroy it to make a quick buck. The current trend of development is to go 'GREEN' and 'ECO' but unfortunately these keywords are completely misused and the damage done to the natural environment is enormous. The laws protecting our wildlife are brilliant but the problem comes when trying to enforce them. I have witnessed how developers wriggle around the laws and blatantly ignore interested and affected parties. I remember an Old Native American saying that fits the current issues in Gauteng perfectly- "*When the last tree has been cut down, the last fish caught, the last river poisoned, only then will we realize that one cannot eat money*".



Above: African Grass-Owl frantically tries to avoid the smoke and flames.

Fortunately for the Grass-Owls in Kyalami, there are still a few areas where suitable habitat can be found such as Bluehills Equestrian Estate however, sadly these areas are under threat from development. Let's hope the developers will do their part to ensure the protection of these valuable areas which will encourage the owls to nest there in the future. In the meantime it is expected that the owls from this particular nesting site will remain in the area for long enough for them to return to their nest once it has fully recovered. The GEKCO team is currently exploring ideas to rehabilitate the damaged site and speed up the process. If you have any experience in this process and would like to assist us in any way please contact us at biodiversity@gekco.co.za.

As I think back to the moments on Friday when the fire was at its hottest and the owls were frantically flying from nest to nest in an attempt to hide from the blistering heat, I am saddened by the thought that if we don't change the current pattern of destruction and rampant development, I might never see another Grass-Owl in this area again... and what a tragic thought that is.

Now that their eight-year nesting site is gone, I wonder where these owls will go?

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