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Self-sustaining population of Indian Peafowl on a wine farm in the Wellington district, Western Cape

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Abstract

A population of at least 60 Indian Peafowl *Pavo cristatus* has been established on a wine farm on the eastern edge of the Paardeberg, near Wellington, in the Western Cape, South Africa. They have been feral for at least 25 years. We describe the daily routine of these birds and provide photographic evidence of breeding. We discuss the need to document other self-sustaining populations in southern Africa, pointing out that Indian Peafowl populations are reported to be decreasing in their natural range in southern Asia, and that in same of the places where populations have become established, they have achieved pest status.

Introduction

The natural range of the Indian Peafowl *Pavo cristatus* is in southern Asia, mainly India (where it is the National Bird (Kushwaha & Kumar 2016)), Nepal and Sri Lanka; it has been introduced to many continents (Kannan & James 2001). Mostly, peafowl are introduced for ornamental purposes and are dependent on humans for food; as a result they are confined to the neighbourhoods of human habitation.

In South Africa, the population which has been the exception is the one on Robben Island, where birds were released in 1968; the population has been feral since introduction, and is undoubtedly self-sustaining (Brooke & Prins 1986, Hockey et al. 1989, Cohen 1997, Crawford & Dyer 2000, Leshoro et al. 2010, Sherley et al. 2011). The population size was estimated to be about 16 in 2000 (Crawford & Dyer 2000) and about 80 birds in summer 2007/08 (Leshoro et al. 2010). Robben Island was the only birding site in southern Africa for which Indian Peafowl was listed by Cohen et al. (2006), generating a large interest in the island by the bird-listing community (LGU pers. obs). Hockey et al. (2005) further enhanced the status of peafowl here by stating that “only the Robben Island population is considered self-sustaining.” However, the population on Robben Island has decreased rapidly since the report of about 80 birds in 2007/08; by 2024, the population consisted of females only, thought to be four birds (Jongikhaya Ngcathu, SANCCOB ranger, pers. comm.), and decreasing to extinction.

Elsewhere in South Africa, most groups of peafowl have traditionally been in the immediate surroundings of farmhouses (Hockey et al. 1989); in addition, there are seemingly self-sustaining populations in suburbs and parks; for example, in Bloemfontein, Free State (de Swardt 2016), and in Amanzimtoti, KwaZulu-Natal (Small 2016).

Here we report on a self-sustaining population of Indian Peafowl at Vondeling Wine Farm (33°35'43"S 18°51'11"E), Western Cape, South Africa. The Vondeling Wine Farm is located on the eastern edge of the Paardeberg, the vineyards extend over the lower slopes of this granite dome. Peafowl were already feral on the farm by 2000

(Bridget Johnson pers. comm.). The peafowl have not been fed, either intentionally or inadvertently, since 2000. There are no farm animals, such as sheep or cattle, so there is no possibility of spillage of fodder.

Observations

Daily routine

The part of the farm frequented by the peafowl consists exclusively of vineyards (Figure 1). The peafowl feed during the day in the vineyards, foraging in the rows of weedy plants between the rows of vines. They presumably feed on invertebrates and plant material. They do not eat grapes (Julian Johnson pers. comm.) and are therefore tolerated on the farm. At around dusk, the birds walk in small groups from the vineyards to their roost site. This consists of a scattered stand of mainly oak trees and some pine trees about 2 ha in area. They fly up into the trees to their overnight roost sites (Figures 2 and 3). At dusk on 9 June 2023, we counted 60 peafowl as they flew to roost sites; the total population at the time was substantially larger than this. At dawn, they fly out from the trees into the nearby vineyards to forage and rest through the day (Figure 4).

The birds were cautious. For example, if people walked past the roost trees when the birds arrived from the vineyards, they turned back and walked into the safety of the vineyards. They waited there until the people were gone before proceeding to the roost trees, even if it was becoming dark.

There were also large numbers of Helmeted Guineafowl *Numida meleagris* on the farm. The two species were frequently observed foraging and roosting together

Breeding

We have not been successful in finding nests, although visits to the farm were limited. The egg-laying period in 2023 must have extended over two to three months, because the first observation of hatchlings was made on 5 November, and sightings of hatchlings continued into

Figure 1: Indian Peafowl occurrence on Vondeling Wine Farm. Yellow box: roosting area; blue box: main foraging area.

Figure 2: Indian Peafowl flying up into roost tree at Vondeling Wine Farm (Photo by LGU).

Figure 3: Indian Peafowl roosting in tree at Vondeling Wine Farm (Photo by LGU)

Figure 4: Group of Indian Peafowl feeding in vineyards at Vondeling Wine Farm (Photo by LGU)

Figure 6: Young Indian Peafowl accompanied by female at Vondeling Wine Farm (Photo by HDO)

Figure 5: Male Indian Peafowl displaying at Vondeling Wine Farm (Photo by LGU)

January 2024. Courtship was observed on 9 December 2023, when males were observed displaying to females in a track between two vineyards (Figure 5). On 18 February 2024 a group of peafowl with an adult female and at least four medium sized young was observed (Figure 6).

Discussion

We do not know the origins of any of the birds introduced to South Africa. The SABAP2 distribution map shows a wide scatter of records (Figure 7). The majority of these records related to peafowl which were largely domestic, occurring in the vicinity of farmsteads, but others were considered by the citizen scientists who recorded them to be more likely to be semi-feral or completely feral (pers. comms). Like many other species kept as pets by humans, if peafowl are neglected, they have the potential to make the transformation to feeding themselves. This seems to be starting to happen to peafowl in South Africa.

The population of Indian Peafowl on Vondeling Wine Farm has been feral for at least 25 years. Their feeding is not human-subsidized in any way, and breeding has been recorded at the farm. Thus, these Indian Peafowl constitute a self-sustaining population.

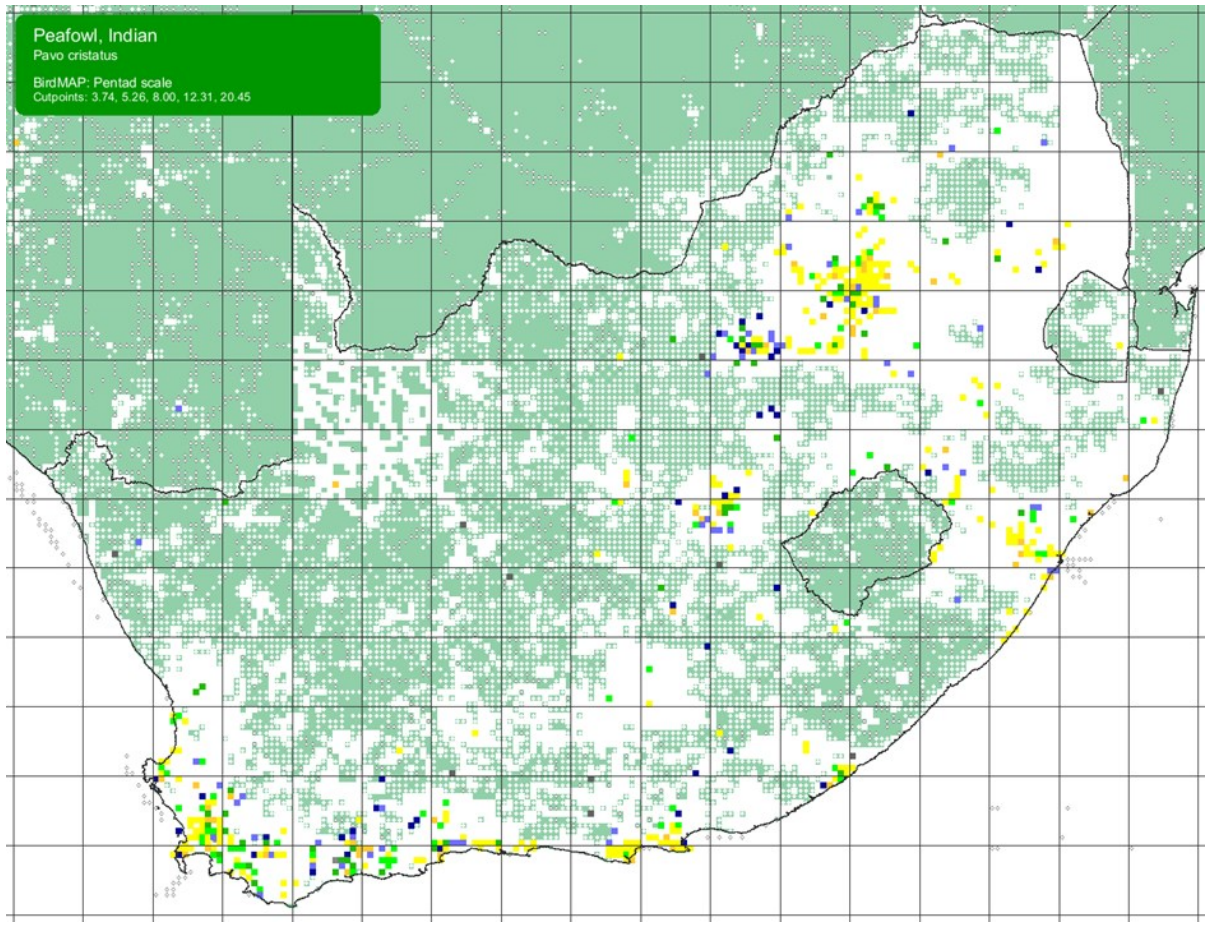

Figure 7: SABAP2 distribution map of Indian Peafowl, downloaded 23 April 2023. The interpretation of this map is described in Underhill & Brooks (2016).

The Indian Peafowl is not thriving in its original range; it is believed that over a period of seven decades the population has halved (Kushwaha & Kumar 2016). The decrease in the population in India was attributed to poaching for meat and feathers, habitat destruction and poisoning, both deliberate and collateral (Kushwaha & Kumar 2016). In the long-term, the possibility exists that introduced populations of Indian Peafowl, such as at Vondeling Wine Farm, might act as *ex situ* conservation localities, providing refuges for the species away from its original ranges. *Ex situ* conservation consists of relocating a sample of individuals from the native population, and allowing them to breed elsewhere. This is usually an expensive undertaking. For the Indian Peafowl it can be done at minimal cost.

It would be valuable to document similar occurrences of self-sustaining populations of peafowl in southern Africa, as done by de Swardt (2016) and Small (2016). For example, we are aware of peafowl at Noordhoek, in the southern Cape Peninsula, Western Cape (Jean Ramsay, pers. comm.), but there is no available information about the size or history of this population. In the situation

described above the peafowl are not persecuted, but in many of the places where feral populations have become established, they are a problem. For example in a town near Los Angeles, California, USA, there were numerous complaints about the peafowl: “These complaints ranged from the loud squawking throughout the day and night, landscape and other property damage, public health concerns from peafowl droppings, and public safety concerns related to potential accidents resulting from vehicles braking/swerving to avoid peafowl on streets” (City of La Cañada Flintridge 2009). In New Zealand, they have pest status because they damage pastures, crops and orchards, and it is legal for landowners to conduct lethal control (Latham 2011). Given these negative experiences in other parts of the world, it would be wise to monitor the Indian Peafowl carefully in southern Africa.

We need a study on the Indian Peafowl which is analogous to that of Andrews et al. (2023), who traced the history of the introduction of the California Quail *Callipepla californica* to Chile and Argentina, and discussed its impact as an invasive species. They make the point that, in common with most invasive species, there is little interest by scientists in undertaking research on them, and comment that “interesting scientific opportunities are being missed.”

Acknowledgements

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Access

Vondeling Wine Farm is strictly private property and is not open to the public.

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