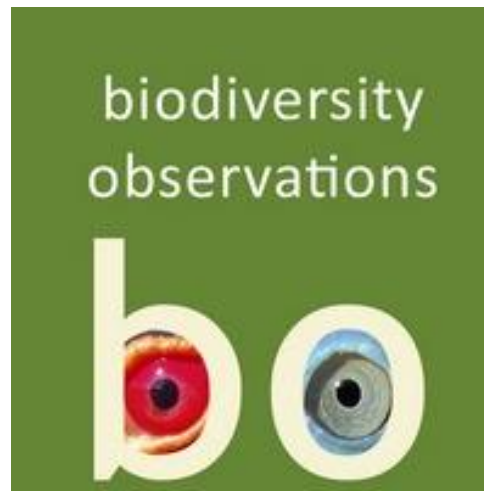


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ORNITHOLOGY

Breeding of White Storks in the Western Cape, South Africa, in 2024

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Abstract

As South Africa's contribution to the Eighth International Worldwide White Stork Census in 2024, we reported that two pairs of White Storks had constructed nests. For one pair, a well-built nest was usurped by Egyptian Geese. The other pair almost certainly laid eggs, but the outcome of the breeding attempt is not known.

Introduction

In Europe, the White Stork *Ciconia ciconia* is an iconic bird species. There can be few species in which the general public shows as much interest as the White Stork. It serves as a flagship for both species and habitat conservation in Europe (Schulz 1999). Trends in abun-

dance of the global population have been monitored through regular internationally coordinated counts starting in 1934, making the White Stork Census one of the oldest international monitoring programmes for any aspect of biodiversity. Since 1974 the census has been conducted at 10-year intervals; the seventh census was in 2014 (NABU 2015).

NABU (BirdLife International partner in Germany) coordinated the Eighth International White Stork Census in 2024. They appointed national coordinators in all countries where White Storks are known to breed. South Africa was included because of a long and remarkable history of breeding records, all in the coastal plain of the Western Cape, between Cape Town and George (Roberts 1941a, 1941b, Martin et al. 1962, Hofmeyr 2001). The Biodiversity and Development Institute was tasked with determining whether there were White Storks breeding in South Africa in 2024. In the seventh census, in 2014, the value which had been entered for South Africa was zero (NABU 2014). In fact, Rose (2025) considered that no White Storks had bred in South Africa since 2010, and that it was unlikely that this breeding population persisted.

We made approaches to two categories of people with a view towards finding out whether there were White Storks breeding in South Africa in 2024. One was to farmers and one was to citizen scientists.

We reasoned that it was essential to put the question to farmers because citizen scientists by-and-large are limited to that section of the countryside that is visible from public roads. Because all previous breeding records had been in the Western Cape, we made contact with Agri Western Cape, the membership organization for the commercial farmers of the province. They placed an article in the May 2024 edition of their newsletter (Figure 1), which is distributed to virtually all farmers in the Western Cape and which remains available on their website.

Our second approach was to citizen scientists. This was done through the social media, and made use of the snowball principle. The content of the post was sufficiently novel that it was widely shared. In addition, there was a blog on the BDI website (Underhill 2024).



White Storks

where are you breeding?

Calling all farmers in the Western Cape: Please help us find where White Storks are breeding!

As we continue to monitor and protect our region's incredible biodiversity, we're turning to you, our valued farmers, for your help. White Storks, an iconic and majestic bird species, occasionally breed in our beautiful Western Cape, and we need your assistance in identifying potential breeding sites.

WHY IS THIS IMPORTANT?

White Storks feed on locusts and other insects. They are every farmer's friends! Every 10 years there is an International White Stork Census. The aim is to find the number of breeding pairs. Every country in Europe, plus South Africa, participates. Most of the White Storks in South Africa are migrants, summer visitors from Europe. South Africa is included because there have been years when there have been up to 10 breeding pairs at farms in the Western Cape. We'd like to find out where those White Storks are breeding sites, so we can better protect these magnificent birds and their habitats.

HOW CAN YOU HELP?

If you're a farmer in the Western Cape and are aware of any White Storks breeding on your farm or nearby, please let us know.

WHAT TO LOOK OUT FOR:

White Storks are large, white birds with a distinctive black wing patch and a long, pointed bill. During breeding season, they typically build large nests on trees, power lines, or other elevated structures.

KEEP AN EYE OUT FOR THESE SIGNS OF BREEDING ACTIVITY:

- Nests or nesting material (sticks, twigs, etc.) on your property
- Adult storks with young or displaying courtship behavior
- Unusual bird activity or vocalizations in the area

HOW TO REPORT SIGHTINGS:

If you have any information about White Stork breeding on your farm or nearby, please contact us at les@thebdi.org or send a message on WhatsApp to **072 062 1140**. We'd love to hear from you! Your contributions will help us better understand and protect these incredible birds.



"Together, we can make a difference for the White Storks and our region's rich biodiversity."

Figure 1: Article in the May 2024 edition of the newsletter of Agri Western Cape appealing to farmers to be alert to White Stork nests on their farms



Figure 2: Unoccupied nest of White Stork at Zandam Farm, 22 May 2024.

Observations

Two sets of observations were reported.

1. *Zandam Pigfarm.*

The nest was first observed on 20 May 2024 by Gigi and Dennis Laidlaw. The nest was in an isolated eucalyptus tree at 33.7647°S, 18.7996°E, 150 m from the R112 road between Durbanville and the T-junction with the R44, west of the Paarl Mountains. The nest was clearly visible from the R112. On 20 May, the pair were on the nest; they displayed the pair-greeting behaviour of bill-clapping with their heads thrown far back. When we visited on 22 May 2024 the pair was seen in the district, but there were no birds on the nest which was well-constructed on a branch of an isolated Eucalypt, an alien tree species (Figure 2). On 17 September, there were no storks on the nest; the pair was feeding in the same field that the nest tree was in, within about 400 m of the nest (Figures 3 and 4). On 24 September 2024, a White Stork was observed standing at the nest (Figure 5). However, by 5 November 2024, the nest had been taken over by Egyptian Geese *Alopochen aegyptiacus* (Figure 6). No White Storks were visible.



Figure 3: Unoccupied nest of White Stork at Zandam Farm, 17 September 2024.



Figure 4: Pair of White Storks feeding in the field at Zandam Farm, 17 September 2024. The nest tree (Figures 1 and 2) was c. 400 m to the right of the storks. The third bird in the photo is an African Sacred Ibis *Threskiornis aethiopicus*.



Figure 6: An Egyptian Goose was sitting in the nest of the White Stork at Zandam Farm on 5 November 2024.



Figure 5: White Stork standing at the nest on Zandam Farm, 24 September 2024. There are three Pied Crows *Corvus albus* on the branch below the nest.

2. *Bredasdorp nest*

The nest is on private property and is not visible from any public road. To protect the breeding pair, and to respect the wishes of the owner of the property, the exact location of this nest is not disclosed, except to state that it is on the Agulhas Plain, in the Bredasdorp district.

On 10 October 2024, when we arrived at 10h29 one adult was standing on the nest (Figure 7). At 10h46, a second adult arrived carrying nest material. (Figure 8). Both birds stayed on the nest until we left at

11h00. We next visited the nest on the afternoon of 29 November 2024. A single bird was sitting on the nest, presumably incubating eggs or brooding small young (Figures 9 and 10). It was a windy day. At 10h30, on 12 December 2024, another extremely windy day, there was one adult sitting low on the nest. There was no sign of chicks. The observers remained in the area for an hour. We do not know whether the breeding attempt produced fledglings.



Figure 7: One White Stork is standing on its nest on the Agulhas Plain on 10 October 2024. The nest is at the centre at the highest point of the rightmost of the cluster of alien Eucalypt trees. These trees are along a fence line with large areas of wheat in the fields on both sides of wheat.



Figure 8: (Top) The second bird in the pair of White Storks brings nest material to the nest on the Agulhas Plain, 10 October 2024. The third photograph (right) shows the nest material being incorporated into the nest by the pair.





Figure 9: The wheat around the nest on the Agulhas Plain had been harvested before our visit on 29 November 2024. From this angle, the nest is at the top of the leftmost cluster of Eucalypts.

Discussion

The White Stork is one of a group of six species which started the 20th century with their status in southern Africa described as “migrant from the Palearctic” but which started breeding in the region.

This paragraph is arranged in order of first breeding record of the remaining five species. The Common House Martin *Delichon urbicum* has been recorded breeding in southern Africa, randomly in space and time, with the first record in 1928 (Earlé 1997). Two breeding records of the Western Osprey *Pandion haliaetus* are considered authentic (Dean & Tarboton 1983). They were made in 1933 and 1963. The Glossy Ibis *Plegadis falcinellus* was first recorded breeding in both the Witwatersrand and the Cape Peninsula in the 1950s



Figure 10: White Stork sitting on its nest on the Agulhas Plain, 29 November 2024. It was a windy day, and we do not know if it was incubating eggs or brooding young.

(Tarboton et al. 1987, Hockey et al. 1989). Described by Roberts (1940) as a migrant from the Palearctic, Booted Eagle *Hieraaetus pennatus* was first discovered to be breeding in the fold mountains of the Western Cape in 1973 (Martin et al. 1974). By 2000, the population of Booted Eagles in this region was estimated to be 702 pairs (Pepler et al. 2001). On four occasions, starting in 1971, there were observations of Leach's Storm Petrels *Hydrobates leucorhous* in the southern hemisphere each of which, with hindsight, ought to have been interpreted as indicative of breeding (Underhill 2024). It was not until 1995 that breeding, on Dyer Island, was confirmed (Whittington & Dyer 1995).

There are two species of Palearctic migrant that are likely candidates to be added to this group. Sandwich Terns *Thalasseus sandvicensis* have been observed performing various courtship behaviours (BM Dyer *in litt.*). Barn Swallows *Hirundo rustica* have been recorded breeding in the southern hemisphere, in Argentina, since 1970, and have established a large population there (Martínez 1983). This could also happen in southern Africa.

Citizen scientists are encouraged to be vigilant and open-minded when observing migrants. They need to avoid the “it-is-impossible” mentality that delayed the confirmation of breeding by Leach's Storm Petrels by more than two decades (Underhill 2024). We need to keep monitoring the breeding of these species.

In particular, when the Ninth International White Stork Census takes place in 2034, we do not want to have to start the search effort from scratch as we had to do for the 2024 census. This journal, Biodiversity Observations, provides a platform on which to report both new breeding localities and the monitoring of known breeding sites (Underhill & Navarro 2023).

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