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TEXT ODETTE CURTIS

As transformed landscapes go, the southern Cape's Overberg is up there at the top of the list, its natural renosterveld vegetation replaced by vast expanses of pasture and crops. It's not all bad news for birds, but there's not much good news either. Odette Curtis, director of the Overberg Renosterveld Conservation Trust, takes stock. >



ODETTE CURTIS (2)

above A Cape Grass-bird on *Oedera squarrosa*, a common daisy shrub in renosterveld.

previous spread It is estimated that no more than 1000 breeding pairs of the endangered and endemic Black Harrier remain.

THE ROLLING hills of the Overberg's lowlands once teemed with life: large herds of antelope roamed the undulating plains of renosterveld that covered these fertile lowlands. Then came the European settlers, who made quick work of eliminating the larger mammals and caused the destruction of local populations of some species such as black

rhino, Cape buffalo and serval, the near-extinction of others such as bontebok and the demise of entire species such as the blue buck.

Unlike the indigenous and nomadic Khoi-Khoi, the settlers needed to mould the landscape to fit their sedentary lifestyle of keeping livestock and growing crops, which led to the systematic removal of the natural vegetation and its replacement with pasture and cropland. In the past 50–100 years, with the advent of mechanical machinery, this habitat transformation reached new heights and today more than 95 per cent of the Overberg's inland lowland habitat has been converted for agriculture. *Ninety-five per cent.* Let that figure sink in a little before you read further.

In a rather depressing conversation about the impacts of severe habitat loss and fragmentation and the degradation of natural ecosystems, a very wise friend,

Professor Muthama Muasya, said to me, 'In a changing landscape there are winners and losers.' Nothing could be more true for the Overberg 'wheatbelt' of the Western Cape, a region identified as an Important Bird and Biodiversity Area (IBA) by BirdLife South Africa yet severely transformed from what it was in its natural state. This landscape contains many birds that have benefited from the broad-scale, irreversible effects of expanding monocultures – and others that have been less fortunate, but are still hanging on, quite literally for dear life, within the islands of natural vegetation that persist.

Renosterveld has been very unlucky in that it has always been considered the 'ugly sister' of fynbos. While fynbos shows off her pretty flowers throughout most of the year, renosterveld hides most of hers and then goes ballistic in spring, exposing most of

them over a short period. This is because the majority of the 'wow' species found in renosterveld are bulbs; dormant for most of the year, they make a bold appearance just once in a 12-month cycle. There are two peak seasons when this otherwise 'grey' habitat is splashed with colour: in autumn, when the striking pink or red lilies appear; and in spring, when a plethora of irises (and other families) burst into bloom, revealing a whole new world of natural wonder.

Appreciating this world means quite literally getting down on hands and knees to see the extraordinary diversity of life harboured in this under-valued but Critically Endangered biodiversity hotspot. And it's a hotspot that is not in any way restricted to plants. Renosterveld is a habitat that is full of surprises, with several rare and endemic birds among them.

### THE WINNERS

The 'winners' Professor Muasya talked about are those bird species that have managed to expand their natural range and/or increase their local population size as a result of the changed landscape. One that has benefited most from the conversion of renosterveld shrubland into more open habitats is the Blue Crane, our national bird. The grassland and Karoo habitats where this much-admired species used to reside have been altered by afforestation, monocultures and overgrazing, resulting in a decline in the availability of breeding and feeding opportunities for it. The plus side for cranes is that the landscape-scale conversion of renosterveld shrubland into cropland and artificial pasture has created perfect habitat for them in the Overberg and Swartland. This has led to a significant increase in the number of Blue Cranes in



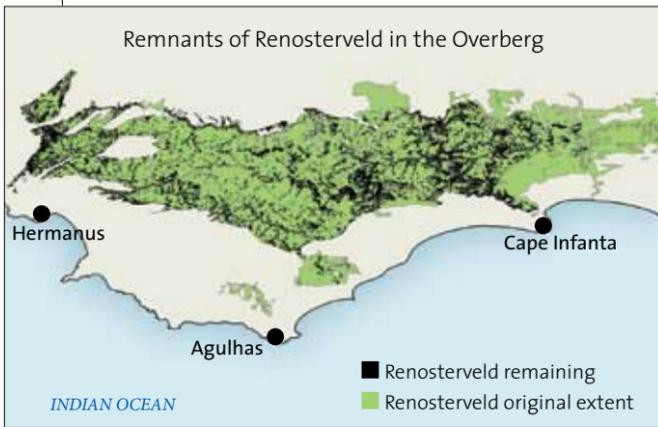
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these areas, where they have fared exceptionally well – but only after farmers stopped persecuting them thanks to the efforts of the Overberg Crane Group. Most farmers in the Overberg are now justifiably proud of their Blue Crane populations.

There are several other species that are winners in the Overberg but may not be doing so well >

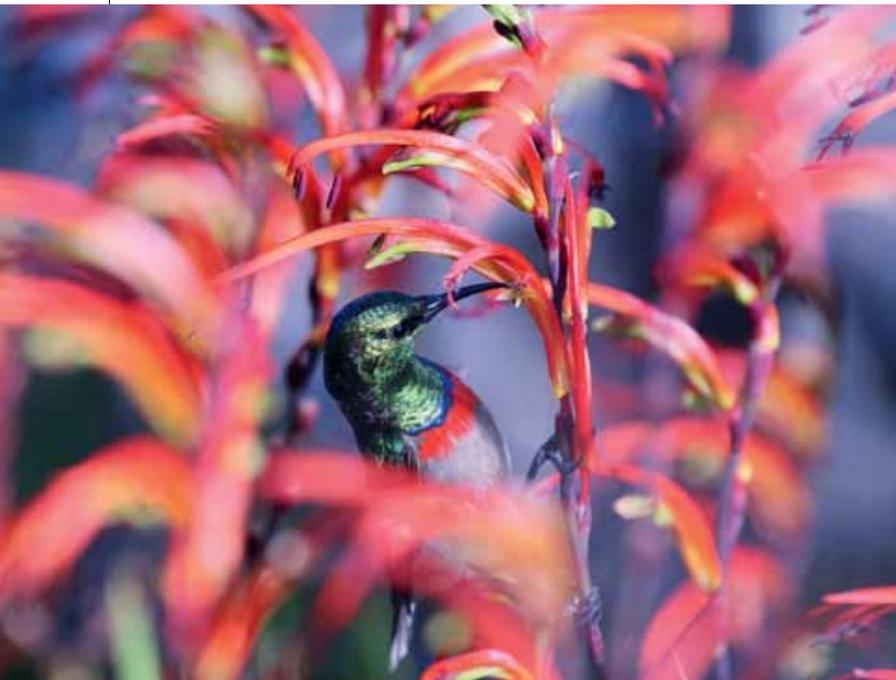
above *The Karoo Korhaan* is one of the 'winners' in the transformed landscapes of the Overberg.

top *Landscapes that were once renosterveld are most startling in summer, stripped bare after harvest.*





*Haarwegskloof Renosterveld Reserve still comprises rolling hills of intact renosterveld, a rare sight in the severely transformed Overberg wheatbelt.*



ODETTE CURTIS (3)

above A Southern Double-collared Sunbird on the Vulnerable Chasmanthe bicolor.

above, right Yellow Bishops are common along renosterveld watercourses.

below The Agulhas Long-billed Lark is an endemic species able to utilise both natural and transformed landscapes.



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in other parts of their range. For example, the large and striking Denham's Bustard makes use of cropland at certain times, being regularly encountered in pasture and on cropped land, yet seldom in fields with growing crops. The bustards favour natural fynbos and renosterveld habitats in their breeding season, but on average (over the course of an entire year) their use of artificial habitats exceeds their use of natural vegetation. While they are threatened by habitat loss in the grassland components of their range, it is

surmised that their population size has increased in the modified landscapes of the Western Cape.

The Secretarybird is another African species of conservation concern, yet it has also adapted to man-altered environments in the Overberg, where it forages in cropland and even occasionally breeds at the top of alien trees. The shy and elusive Karoo Korhaan has apparently also extended its range into the Overberg and Agulhas Plain region due to its ability to adapt to agricultural habitats. It is now regularly encountered in the eastern regions of the Overberg wheatbelt, although its cousin the Southern Black Korhaan has not fared so well.

Several other more common species – the likes of Helmeted Guineafowl, Spur-winged Goose, Egyptian Goose and Hadeda Ibis – have moved into the Western Cape's fertile lowlands over the past few decades, mostly as a result of habitat transformation or the availability of water bodies in the form of farm dams. Smaller, grain-feeding birds such

as Cape Sparrows and Yellow and Southern Red bishops have also thrived in these 'new' habitats, as have species that are able to take advantage of the more open cropland and the intermittent fence posts and fences, including Capped Wheatear, African Stonechat, African Pipit, Cape Long-claw, Cloud and Zitting cisticolas, Common Quail and Large-billed and Red-capped larks.

And of course there are many raptors that are able to make use of cropland. These tend to be the pole-hunting, rodent-focused species such as the buzzards (Jackal and Steppe) and Spotted Eagle-Owl; the scavengers such as the Yellow-billed Kite; and occasionally the pursuit-hunting Lanners and Peregrines that take advantage of the high numbers of Speckled Pigeons on open cropped land.

### THE LOSERS

The 'losers' in this landscape are the birds that can make only limited use of the transformed matrix and depend mostly on the natural remnants of vegetation that have been spared the plough.



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These species tend to be of high conservation concern.

One of the most important is the Black Harrier, an endemic, Endangered and strikingly beautiful raptor with an estimated population of fewer than 2000 individuals. Research has shown that this species breeds only in the largest and most connected pieces of renosterveld and that while it may forage in cropland, it is entirely dependent on natural habitat for building its ground-nests and raising its young. There is no doubt that this species has lost very large sections of breeding habitat within its natural range. The same goes for the Southern Black Korhaan, whose Overberg populations have plummeted in the past decade. Almost certainly, this species is entirely dependent on remnants of renosterveld within the wheatbelt for both foraging and breeding.

Several small and attractive endemics or near-endemics that are present in remnants of

renosterveld essentially make no use of the surrounding agricultural matrix. Karoo Scrub Robin (one of the most common birds in renosterveld), Cape Grassbird, Yellow and White-throated canaries, Karoo Prinia, Grey-backed Cisticola and Cape Bunting are among these species.

Although the Cape Vulture is able to make use of the revamped lowlands for foraging, it has nevertheless been a loser in this landscape. Today only one colony persists in the Western Cape: at Potberg within De Hoop Nature Reserve. In the past these wide-ranging birds of prey had access to an extensive landscape of natural habitat that held an abundance of food. Ironically, though, this particular colony is the only one in the country that is healthy and growing – a circumstance due primarily to the goodwill of farmers around Potberg who feed the vultures by leaving livestock carcasses out for them. This colony has therefore been able to adapt



to the new landscape by breeding on cliffs in a protected area and foraging in the surrounding transformed matrix.

It may lack the large, showy proteas and the ericas that characterise fynbos, but renosterveld is regarded as the habitat with the highest diversity of bulbs on the planet. It is also rich in >

above A bluebottle fly pollinates the bulb *Wurmbea variabilis*.

top The Near Threatened Blue Crane has benefited enormously from the conversion of renosterveld to croplands and pastures.



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ODETTE CURTIS (2)

**IT MAY LACK THE LARGE, SHOWY PROTEAS AND THE ERICAS THAT CHARACTERISE FYNBOS, BUT RENOSTERVELD IS REGARDED AS THE HABITAT WITH THE HIGHEST DIVERSITY OF BULBS ON THE PLANET**

the leaves. The climbing *Micro-loma* species (commonly known as wax-creepers or *bokhorinkies*), with their tiny, waxy red (*M. tenuifolia*) or pink (*M. sagittatum*) cup-like flowers, have a special relationship with the smaller sunbirds, which transfer pollen sacs from one plant to the next via their tongues.

Renosterveld contains several microhabitats, particularly in the various watercourses, rivers and seepage areas that run through the region's kloofs. Thickets form along river banks or deep valleys, creating habitat for Bar-throated Apalis, Southern

Tchagra, Long-billed Crombec and Chestnut-vented Tit-babbler, to name a few. Within the more open or brackish watercourses are patches of *Juncus* sedge and thorny *Asparagus* thickets, where Cape Spurfowl roost at night and porcupines hide during the day. *Phragmites* reedbeds line some stretches of the watercourses and are occupied by Southern Red Bishop and Cape and Southern Masked weavers. These rivers and seeps also provide excellent habitat for Levillant's Cisticola and Yellow Bishop.

The endemic Cape Clapper Lark is neither a true 'loser' nor a 'winner' in the sense that its population size has not decreased or increased as a result of habitat transformation. It is, however, largely dependent on natural fynbos and renosterveld habitats and will only venture out into cropland if close to natural vegetation. Best known for its 'clapping' display accompanied by two drawn-out 'peeoo' calls and a comical and not-so-elegant descent, this species to me signifies



the Overberg wheatbelt and is associated with many wonderful mornings spent in the field.

Two endemic gamebirds, the Cape Spurfowl and Grey-winged Francolin, have surely suffered local population declines as a result of the high level of habitat loss in the Overberg. While both species do forage in cropland, they also depend on renosterveld shrubland for breeding, and for foraging when the cropland is barren for the six months between harvesting and planting. Cover is particularly important for these species, for nesting and as protection from predators, while the bulbs in renosterveld provide a crucial food source for them.

### Haarwegskloof Renosterveld Reserve

The Overberg Lowlands Conservation Trust (now trading as the Overberg Renosterveld Conservation Trust; ORCT) was founded in April 2012 for the primary purpose of conserving the region's renosterveld by working with landowners to foster more sustainable

habitat management and create long-term conservation partnerships. Although our work spans the entire Overberg wheatbelt from Botrivier to Heidelberg, one of our most important achievements has been the establishment of Haarwegskloof Renosterveld Reserve. Through our partnership with WWF South Africa, this

500-hectare farm was purchased by WWF South Africa and entrusted to the ORCT for management. To date we have recorded more than 500 plant, 120 bird, 36 mammal, 17 reptile, five amphibian and numerous invertebrate species in this reserve. It may be small in area, but in renosterveld terms it's pretty large! ♦

*Renosterveld fragments remain as islands in a sea of farmland, making their inhabitants vulnerable to further localised extinctions.*

### What's at Haarwegskloof

Since the ORCT took over the management of Haarwegskloof Renosterveld Reserve, we have established in it the first-ever visitor and research centre dedicated to renosterveld. We encourage everyone who loves the natural world and would like to learn more about renosterveld and all its inhabitants to visit the centre and to stay in the self-catering accommodation provided. The reserve also offers an excellent chance to tick off some local endemics and to enjoy several of the local threatened bird species, including the Cape Vultures that visit regularly from Potberg and the Black Harriers that breed here in some years.

The reserve's 'gem' is the quartz patch on the outcrop, from which you get the best views of the landscape and can follow a short circular walking trail, passing rare and super-endemic plants (many of which have only been described in the past few years). The trail is clearly marked and several of the plants are tagged for easy identification.

Haarwegskloof lies only about 10 kilometres north of De Hoop Nature Reserve as the crow flies and about 40 kilometres from Malgas, so a visit to the reserve can be combined with several other activities in the area.

Please support our important work and visit our special reserve – you won't be sorry.

For bookings and enquiries, e-mail [bookings@overbergrenosterveld.org.za](mailto:bookings@overbergrenosterveld.org.za), or visit [www.overbergrenosterveld.org.za](http://www.overbergrenosterveld.org.za) for more information.