

TOP SPOT

WORDS & PICTURE
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Daredevils of the Kruger



FLYING COLOURS. The lilac-breasted roller eats mainly insects, but also small snakes, frogs and baby birds.

Like kingfishers and bee-eaters, rollers are among our most striking birds. Mark D Anderson tells us more about these acrobats of the sky.

You can't miss them. When you visit the Kruger National Park, the bird you're most likely to notice first is a roller. Why? Because of its striking lilac, purple and blue feathers, and the fact that it likes to sit on a favourite perch – often on a branch right next to the road. If there's a grass fire, you might also see these insect-eaters gather to feast on any small creatures trying to escape the flames.

Do you know which species it is? There are five roller species in southern Africa, three of which live here permanently (the lilac-breasted, racket-tailed and purple roller) and two that are migratory (European and broad-billed).

Northern Kruger is one of the few places where you can see all five species, literally side by side during the summer months. So, when you spot a roller, grab your bird book to confirm your identification.

Now for the air show. The lilac-breasted roller can often be seen "rolling" in a flight display.

They do this year-round, but this show peaks during the breeding season (August to February).

During these displays the male flies up steeply, like a fighter pilot, to between 20 and 50 m off the ground. It then tips forward and dives down again with furled wings. At the bottom of the dive the bird will open its wings and roll from side to side, before repeating the display.

When it's done showing off, the male will land next to the female, who will then join in the excitement by calling with him.

Rollers nest in holes in trees, where they lay two to four eggs. They will fiercely protect their nest hole, even when not breeding, and are very territorial.

Did you know? Rollers' attractive colours come from a combination of the pigments in their feathers and keratin, the protein that feathers are made of. The pigment melanin produces black and dark-brown feathers, and carotenoids make red, orange and yellow feathers. The shimmering blue and green colours are created by the reflecton of light off the layered keratin. 