



# Hunter... not a scribe

This secretary will not do your filing or type your letters, so how did the secretarybird get its name? Mark D Anderson explains.

**A bird by any other name...** Some people say the long black-tipped feathers at the back of the secretarybird's neck look like quill pens that secretaries used to tuck behind their ears. A more likely suggestion is that the name is derived from the Arabic *saqr-et-tair*, meaning "hunter bird", because of the way the bird stalks its prey.

Its scientific name, *Sagittarius serpentarius*, is also interesting. The first part comes from the Latin for arrow (*Sagitta*) and archer (*Sagittarius*); early explorers thought the bird's upright posture and dignified stride made it look

like an archer about to fire an arrow. The second part, *serpentarius*, Latin for snake-holder, refers to the bird's preying on snakes.

**Ground level.** Driving through the Karoo or open grassland, you'd have to be very preoccupied not to spot a few of these birds. They are also common in the Kruger and the Kgalagadi.

Secretarybirds spend most of the day striding across the veld. One has been recorded taking 120 steps a minute (about 3 km/h)! You might also have seen a bird stamping on a tuft of grass as it tries to flush prey.

**Dangerous diet.** Apart from eating anything from grasshoppers to birds, the secretarybird is also partial to snakes. It will even eat poisonous snakes such as puff adder and cobra. The bird kills the snake with a sharp stamping blow to the head, and shows its excitement when doing this by raising its wings and crest feathers.

**Safety in numbers.** Any animal that eats snakes is usually considered worth protecting, but despite this the secretarybird's numbers are apparently declining – it is listed as "near-threatened" in the Red Data Book. This is because of habitat

degradation, changing land-use and declining food sources. Many are killed flying into fences and telephone and power lines.

**If you want to get involved...**

- Take part in the Coordinated Avifaunal Roadcount project – contact Donella Young on [donella.young@uct.ac.za](mailto:donella.young@uct.ac.za);
- Report the location of nests to the EWT's Birds of Prey Working Group – contact André Botha on [andreb@ewt.org.za](mailto:andreb@ewt.org.za); or
- Inform the EWT's Wildlife Energy Interaction Group of power-line collisions – contact Jon Smallie on [jons@ewt.org.za](mailto:jons@ewt.org.za). 