

TOP SPOT

PICTURES & WORDS
MARK D ANDERSON



When kestrels come home to roost

One of the great summer birding sights in some South African towns is thousands of lesser kestrels that congregate in tall trees at dusk, says Mark D Anderson.

Where can I see them? In the summer months you'll spot lesser kestrels along inland roads, but the best place to watch them is at their roost sites in towns where thousands mill around in the air before settling down for the night.

My favourite place is in De Aar in the Northern Cape. Here, at the station and in the hospital grounds, up to 13 500 lesser kestrels sleep in just a few trees. I have spent many balmy evenings there, camera in hand and sundowner within reach, marvelling at this awe-inspiring spectacle of the bird world.

Why only in summer? Lesser kestrels make an annual round trip of more than 20 000 km between their breeding grounds in Europe and Asia, and sub-Saharan Africa.

They arrive in South Africa during November and start heading back north during March.

They are most common in the moister central regions of South Africa, especially the Highveld grasslands, but are also found in the Karoo. They spend most of the time feeding on locusts and termites, fattening themselves up for their long flight north.

Urban dwellers. Roosting together offers safety in numbers, but no one knows why these kestrels choose to sleep in towns and contend with bright lights, car hooters, exhaust fumes and other disturbances. One theory is that urban areas offer slightly warmer night temperatures and also safety from predators.

Going, going, but hopefully never gone. There has been a catastrophic decline in lesser kestrel numbers, which are listed as "vulnerable" in the international Red Data list. In South Africa, they may have been affected by pesticides used to control locusts.

Road casualties are a problem too. Ronelle Visagie, a raptor conservationist in the eastern Karoo, once found 144 dead lesser kestrels along a 300 km stretch of road.

Many are also killed and maimed in hailstorms. One particularly nasty hailstorm in De Aar in March 1994 caused the injury and death of 693 lesser kestrels.

Find out more... Visit the website www.kestreling.com, which has a list of roost sites.



INCOMING! One of the intriguing aspects of lesser kestrels is their habit of massing to sleep in a communal roost at night. Such a roost is usually a large exotic tree like a bluegum in a town or city. There are about 155 roosting places in South Africa where you can watch them settling at dusk.