

Putting Africa on the map

THE MIGRATING KESTREL PROJECT



The Lesser Kestrel *Falco naumanni* is one of a number of long-distance migratory species that breed in western Eurasia and overwinter in southern Africa. In the past 30 years, its global population has decreased by approximately 50 per cent, and it is now on a shortlist of the world's more threatened birds. The plight of this attractive species prompted a flurry of research and conservation action in the past decade, including the launch in 1995 of the Migrating Kestrel Project (MKP) in South Africa. Run under the auspices of the Endangered Wildlife Trust's Raptor Conservation Group (now the Birds of Prey Working Group), this initiative set out to survey and monitor the populations of migratory kestrels, focusing in particular on the Lesser Kestrel, but including the Amur *F. amurensis* and Red-footed *F. vespertinus* falcons.

There were three important factors that motivated strongly for the initial establishment of this project, and that underline the need to continue and expand the migrating kestrel monitoring effort. Firstly, a significant proportion of the global populations of all three of the species concerned overwinter in southern Africa, and secondly, all three species are potentially impacted by loss of habitat, and by depletion and contamination of their invertebrate prey base. Thirdly, all three species aggregate in large communal roosts, which greatly facilitates counting

and uniquely qualifies southern African observers to achieve accurate global population estimates.

To date, the main aims of the Migrating Kestrel Project have been to count kestrels at as many roosts across the region as possible, to identify any serious threats to these populations, and to create awareness of the need to



ALBERT FRONEMAN (2)

Alit laborer cincip el iustrud modigna faccummy nim doloreratem vel

protect and conserve these special birds. Over the past 10 years, the number of Lesser Kestrel roosts monitored by the project has grown from nine to 26, and Hein Pienaar, who initiated the project, has built up a dedicated team of volunteers who have done concerted counts of their local roosts every summer. During Hein's tenure as co-ordinator, the project has gathered

a mine of valuable information on kestrel numbers and also contributed significantly to the international conservation effort. Because of work pressures and time constraints, Hein recently relinquished his position at the helm of the study to Anthony van Zyl, whose immediate goals are to continue the excellent work of Hein and

his team, while trying to expand the size and reach of the volunteer base. He also intends to launch a national kestrel census day, and to initiate ringing and diet and habitat-use studies to run in conjunction with the roost surveys.

Watching a flock of thousands of these little falcons wheeling around a roost site at dusk is an unforgettable experience, and we in southern Africa are the primary custodians of this avian spectacle. Our information suggests that the present network of counters in the MKP project covers less than a quarter of the possible total number of large, easily accessible roost sites in the region.

The future success of the project depends on improving this degree of coverage. Would you like to get involved? Do you have a kestrel roost near where you live or spend your holidays? If so, please contact Anthony van Zyl as soon as possible to sign up as a member of the MKP team for the 2005/2006 count season. □

For more details, contact Anthony van Zyl, Co-ordinator of the Migrating Kestrels Project, a project of the Endangered Wildlife Trust's Birds of Prey Working Group. E-mail anthony@kestreling.com or tel. (021) 781 0230. Read more about the new initiatives of the Migrating Kestrel Project on www.kestreling.com or www.ewt.org.za

