

BUSHtelegraph

Contact us on: Tel:

(014) 736 9000 - Fax: (014) 736 9001 - E-mail: info@mabalingwe.co.za

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Oxpeckers/



Oxpeckers on kudu

The little birds that you see sitting on all antelope species, catching a ride on a hot summers day – that is the most wanted friend in the bush! As the days goes by and summer creeps closer you will see these birds becoming more active by the day, the warmer it gets the more ticks will breed thus making more food available to the oxpeckers. This little bird feeds on blood – the easy way for them to obtain blood is from ticks. Big fat juicy ticks. These birds can consume up to eighty ticks a day - yep, up to 80!



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Distribution and Habitat

Oxpeckers are found only in sub-Saharan Africa and do not occupy deserts and rainforests but prefer open habitats. Their distribution is greatly influenced by the presence of the tick species on which they feed. This in turn, is strongly influenced by the distribution patterns of the host mammal species on which the ticks feed.

Feeding Habits

Oxpeckers will first and foremost feed on ticks but will also eat other ectoparasites and will always be seen perching on the backs of larger mammals enjoying their food. They do seem to favour certain mammals which may be related to varying tick loads. They can also be seen on the backs of cattle but will generally avoid the smaller antelope.

Breeding

The breeding season of oxpeckers tends to be linked to the rainy season which not only affects the activity of their hosts but also the tick loads of their hosts. Courtship, mating and copulation occur on the hosts as well. Their nests will usually be in holes in trees but can also be in holes in walls. Grasses and even hair are used to line the nests in which they will typically lay 2-3 eggs.



So folks, next time you drive past an animal with some birds on its back, it is not just lazy birds catching a ride but rather much needed tick removers.

It's a way of life!



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