

People around South Africa are talking...

Birds and birding have been my passion for as long as I can remember...

...from early schooldays - when every spare hour was spent looking for, or observing birds, or reading about them - to the present day where the passion is still there, but the action is rather less intense. With the help of peers in the early years I quickly learnt the songs and call-notes of the birds around me, and over the years developed and fine-tuned this skill to cover the songs and calls of most of the birds found across southern Africa. This skill had many benefits in my capacity as a professional ornithologist, and much of the time that I spent in the field conducting surveys and monitoring birds was enhanced by my ability to detect and identify even the most secretive of species on the basis of my past experience with the sounds it made.

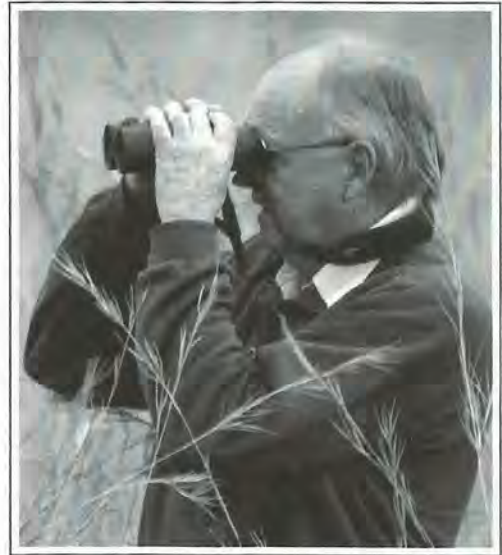
Many birds, probably at least half of southern Africa's 950-odd species, have high-pitched songs, uttering sounds that are pitched in the 5000 -7000 Hz frequency range; this is especially characteristic of groups of birds such as warblers, sunbirds and larks. About ten years ago it started to dawn on me that birds of this ilk were disappearing from my radar screen. Initially I wondered why these species - birds like Willow Warblers, Rufous-naped Larks and other old friends - seemed to have diminished in abundance, and it was only when I was out with other birders that I came to the realisation that these species were still all around me, but I was no longer hearing them. To many people a diminished ability to hear birds would be of little consequence, but to me, a professional ornithologist for most of my working life, it presented a handicap that was as profound to me as would be the loss of a limb to an athlete.

Together with my wife, who has very good hearing and an excellent knowledge of bird calls, I started to explore the nature and extent of my loss, using birds that I could and couldn't hear as bench-marks. It became clear that I was not impaired regarding low-pitched sounds, but there was a sharp drop-off in my ability to hear species that called at frequencies above about 3000 Hz. I sought professional help, and my initial efforts resulted in my being fitted

with a pair of hearing aids that did nothing to help my situation. It was a costly failure that left me feeling that this was the end of the road as far as my being able to hear birds was concerned.

Recently, I was urged by my family to give hearing aids another try and that's when Widex entered my life. Their audiologist assessed my problem and confirmed that my loss was in the higher-pitched sound range, a 60% loss in one ear and 50% loss in the other. I was measured up for, and fitted with a pair of Senso Diva hearing aids.

It is still early days living with my new ears, and the brain has a lot of catching up to do, but I've renewed my relationship with Rufous-naped Larks, Willow Warblers and a host of other species that I thought had left the scene. And it's not just birds that have returned to my radar but crickets, cicadas and even buzzy mosquitos! The brain side of things has not been as fast to catch up on this new development. Its capacity to filter out unwanted background noises has been largely dormant these past few years and the response to accommodating my new ears has been less immediate. Also, I have forgotten the sounds that many of the high-pitched species make. To regain this lost ground requires much application, as many novice birdwatchers learning bird calls for the first time will attest to; but, as with so many other aspects of birdwatching, the learning process is as pleasurable as the end result.



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