

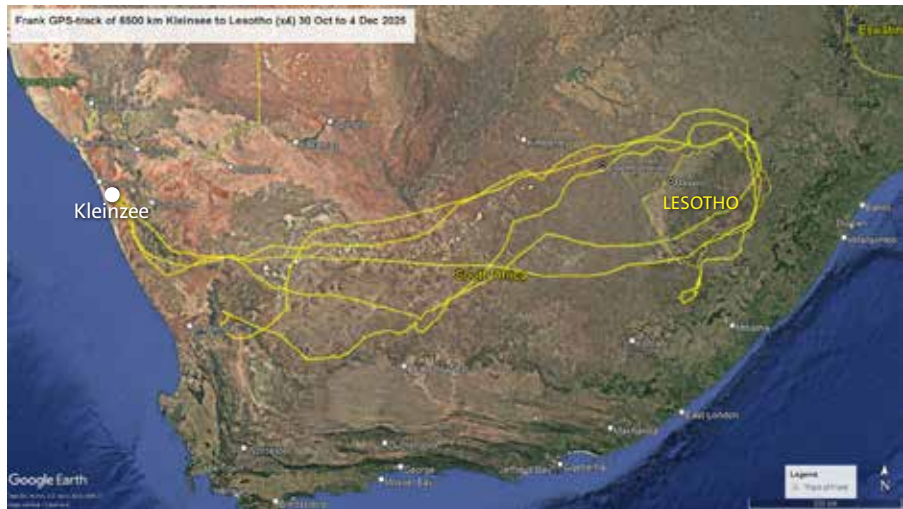
the ultimate nomad

Like most birds, Black Harriers migrate seasonally, leaving their breeding grounds when conditions deteriorate and going in search of food and more favourable temperatures elsewhere.

About 15 years ago, raptor researchers began fitting Black Harriers with GPS trackers to discover more about their movements and migration patterns. Data from 13 birds tracked over seven years revealed that Black Harriers are highly nomadic intra-African migrants. Although most travel west to east – tracking summer rainfall from the Western Cape to the Eastern Cape, KwaZulu-Natal and Mpumalanga – there is marked individual variation in their annual movements.

During these journeys the harriers often traverse the Great Karoo, flying high and quickly across an arid region with few suitable stopover habitats. They can travel up to 814 kilometres per day, taking 4–16 days to reach their destination. One female covered 525 kilometres in just 12 hours from Piketberg in the Western Cape to Kokstad in KwaZulu-Natal, flying mostly 400–600 metres above the ground. One male travelled 6580 kilometres in just 36 days (see map).

Unlike many other species, Black Harriers migrate faster during the post-breeding period in the austral summer – averaging about 208 kilometres a day – than during pre-breeding movements in winter and spring, when they average 144 kilometres. This appears to be because birds are prospecting for potential



breeding habitats on their return journeys. This behaviour was first documented in 2010, when a female explored areas from Lesotho back to her 2009 nesting site in West Coast National Park before eventually settling to breed in the Camdeboo Mountains. Two successive breeding sites 500 kilometres apart is unique among raptors in southern Africa.

It is increasingly clear that the seasonal movements of Black Harriers are strongly influenced by rainfall and vegetation growth, which determine the abundance of small mammals. Breeding Black Harriers feed primarily on striped mice, and migration appears to begin when food diminishes in breeding areas at the end of the season. But not all individuals migrate; about 10 per cent of tracked birds remained in the same area year-round.

The non-breeding season lasts from December/January to May–July. During this time adults often return to the same areas year after year, typically using up to three different sites spaced an average of 200 kilometres apart. Only two of the 13 tracked birds were confirmed as breeders in the year following tagging, which suggests that individuals may skip breeding when conditions are poor. In contrast,

The remarkable 6580-kilometre journey of a Black Harrier male (Frank) that traversed the country four times in little over a month between October and December 2025.

when rainfall has recently been better, GPS-tagged birds in the Overberg bred for 2–3 consecutive years, reinforcing the idea that Black Harriers track weather patterns and breed opportunistically when conditions are favourable.

Most of the 13 tagged Black Harriers died during migration or in the non-breeding season. More recently, as improved conditions have kept birds in the Overberg for longer, collisions with vehicles, power lines and wind turbines have become increasingly significant causes of mortality. In one bizarre incident, a breeding male was killed at night by a wheat harvester while roosting near his nest. Fortunately, the female was able to continue feeding their two recently fledged chicks.

DR MARIE-SOPHIE GARCIA-HERAS, DR ROB SIMMONS & DR ODETTE CURTIS-SCOTT

If current rates of human-related mortality continue, Black Harriers are predicted to go extinct within the next 75 years. Support the work of the Black Harrier Task Force by getting in touch with the Overberg Renosterveld Trust. overbergrenosterveld.org.za/


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