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Australian heatwave could result in mass deaths of birds, say UCT, UP researchers

UCT team leads research on impact of heatwaves on birds

As the heatwave in Australia continues, many birds may no longer be able to cope with the heat and large numbers could die as a result, warn researchers at the Universities of Cape Town and Pretoria.

An international research team, led by researchers at the Percy FitzPatrick Institute of African Ornithology at the University of Cape Town, are investigating how heatwaves affect the physiology and behaviour of birds.

"Heatwaves in 2009 and 2010, which did not reach the intensity of the current record-breaking heatwave, led to large die-offs of birds in parts of Australia" says Professor Andrew McKechnie from the University of Pretoria.

On Twitter, over the past few days, people tweeted about finding dead birds in their backyards. Conditions are likely to worsen as the heatwave continues.

They are on high alert for reports of impacts of the current Australian heatwave as such events will be valuable for predicting how climate change will affect birds.

A recent study by the team in Southern Africa's Kalahari revealed that on days when temperatures exceeded 35 °C, a temperature far below those currently being experienced across much of Australia, wild birds began to lose body condition.

“At higher temperatures, the demands of keeping cool meant that the bird’s ability to forage was compromised and their feeding rate declined as temperatures increased” says Dr Rowan Martin of the Percy FitzPatrick Institute. These effects could accumulate over a number of days with long-term consequences for populations.

Another study by the team, in collaboration with the University of New Mexico, suggests that at higher temperatures impacts could be more immediate. At temperatures of 45 °C, and without access to water, the time for hydration levels to drop below thresholds critical for survival could be as short as 4 hours for a 5g bird, or 5.5 hours for a 25g bird.

Many Australians are putting out extra water for wild birds and other animals which could prove critical to their survival. Ensuring bowls of water are placed in the shade may help further.

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