Communication and Marketing Department
Isebe loThungelwano neNtengiso
Kommunikasie en Bemarkingsdepartement

Private Bag X3, Rondebosch 7701, South Africa
Welgelegen House, Chapel Road Extension, Rosebank, Cape Town
Tel: +27 (0) 21 650 5427/5428/5674 Fax: +27 (0) 21 650 5628

www.uct.ac.za

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Flight delays: A recent study finds out why some African birds stay home longer

Parents of millennials still living at home are not the only ones with children that refuse to leave. Many animal species have adult offspring that are slow to take flight, but when and how they leave home has been poorly understood by scientists. But new research on a desert-dwelling African bird is now yielding some answers.

A study by researchers from the University of Cape Town's (UCT) Institute of African Ornithology, the University of Western Australia, and Capilano University in North Vancouver examined the behaviour of wild Southern Pied Babblers, which live in family groups of up to 14 in the Kalahari Desert in South Africa.

Dr Martha Nelson-Flower, study lead author and postdoctoral fellow at the University of British Columbia, was part of the study.

The findings, published in the Journal of Animal Ecology, suggest that better prospects elsewhere, as well as family dynamics between brothers and stepfathers, play a big part ir determining when offspring disperse.

The team used 11 years of data to investigate how the dispersal of male and female babblers was affected by their position in the group social hierarchy, conditions in the environment, and the benefits of staying in their group. They discovered large distinctions between the sexes. Female birds were more independent, but tended to remain at home when in a larger (and therefore safer) group. In contrast, males left only when they had improved chances of leading a group of their own elsewhere.

Nelson-Flower explained: "Males often leave when there's more rain, which probably means there's more food in the environment. They also leave when there are more breeding vacancies for males, and when the distance between groups is small. We think that's because they're more likely to encounter other groups, and they can check to see if there are any breeding vacancies in those groups."

However, a male's position in the group social hierarchy made a big difference to their decision to disperse. Brothers queue for an opportunity to inherit the leadership of their group – or that of a neighbouring group – by leaving early, younger brothers could boost their queue position and improve their prospects. Intriguingly, males with step-fathers alsc left early, likely because step-fathers prioritise their own, younger sons in the queue.

In contrast, females lower in the pecking order did not leave early, but bided their time, waiting for opportunities to overthrow dominant females in other groups. Nelson-Flower suggests this may be because they sometimes achieve dominance through extreme aggression. "A large subordinate strong female would go to a group with a dominant female, and attack that female until she left. Sometimes sisters would come in pairs, and they would work together," she added.

Notes to Editors

To access the full study, click **here.**

Southern Pied Babbler Credit: Tom Flower

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Aamirah Sonday
Media Liaison and Monitoring Officer
Communication and Marketing Department
University of Cape Town
Rondebosch
Tel: (021) 650 5427
Fax: (021) 650 3780
Cell: (076) 947 6071

Email: aamirah.sonday@uct.ac.za
Website: www.uct.ac.za