

TEEN'S BIRD'S

EYE ON CONSERVATION

Olivia Taylor proves nature conservation is not just for the birds!

BY VANESSA PAPAS

It's a Diderick cuckoo," says 15-year-old Olivia Taylor confidently, pointing to a rather ordinary looking bird. "You're lucky to spot it, with only a handful here at the botanical gardens." Fortunately, Olivia's camera is always with her and she takes a few snaps of the bird before it flies away.

Flipping through the photos on her camera, it's obvious Olivia's heart is entrenched in nature conservation, with pictures of her protesting against seal clubbing in Namibia, cleaning litter off our beaches and countless photos of several different bird species, including the often misunderstood bearded vulture.

A school trip to the Botanical Gardens when Olivia was 10 first sparked her love for birds. A few months later, that love extended to the bearded vulture while on a trip to Eshowe. "We stayed in a B&B owned by Hugh Chittenden, one of South Africa's leading ornithologists and authors, who encouraged me to visit a place called Giant's Castle, which is home to my favourite hide," says Olivia, sipping on a chocolate milkshake. "I dragged my family to the hide twice within a few months, but both times we didn't get to see any vultures. During the trips I met Ian Rushworth, an ecological advisor at KwaZulu-Natal Ezemvelo Wildlife and he told me all about the Ezemvelo Bearded Vulture Project. The project aims to ensure the well-being and conservation of bearded vultures in Southern Africa by tracking these birds and educating the general public about the importance of their role in biodiversity and the environment."

Olivia wanted to get involved and started thinking of ways to raise money for the project. Baking and selling cupcakes was her initial thought, but when she heard it costs R15 000 each year to track just one bird she realised cupcakes were probably not the most lucrative idea and turned her sights on hounding all her dad's business clients for sponsorships instead! Eventually, after a lot of persistence, she had raised R70 000.

"The bearded vulture is dying out with only about 100

pairs remaining in SA, putting them on the endangered species list," says Olivia. "The money raised is being used to fit tracking units to the vultures so we can trace their movements to see where and how they need help and if we are being successful in their conservation. Already, 17 bearded vultures have been fitted with satellite transmitters to obtain more information on their movement patterns and causes of mortality."

While to date, it appears that poisoning and collisions with power lines are the primary threats facing these birds, Olivia adds that there are a lot of myths around vultures, which contribute to the high number of vulture deaths. Some farmers believe vultures are livestock predators when, in fact, they are scavengers that feed on carcasses of dead animals, living mainly on a diet of bone marrow. In some rural communities vultures are killed and their body parts used by traditional healers and sangomas for muthi. There is a belief that smoking a vulture's brain brings powers of clairvoyance to the smoker and can increase one's intelligence, while the feet and beak of a vulture are believed to bring good luck in gambling.

"If we know where these vultures live, we can go into these areas and debunk these myths by educating the communities living there. Conservationists for the project have already visited several schools and spoken to the children about the importance of vulture conservation, after tracking the whereabouts of a group of vultures through the tracking devices."

For her commitment to the project, Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife even named a vulture after Olivia - a juvenile bird that was tagged in 2010 and still has her 'baby' plumage. "I had an amazing amount of support from my sponsors, Aspen Pharmacare, Turkuazoo, Shepstone & Wylie Attorneys, Suncoast Casino, Taylor & Finlay Attorneys and Marriott." In addition to the work Olivia is doing for the bearded vulture, she also runs her own conservation website called Four Elements. "The fourlementsconservation.org website was established to

combat misperceptions that cause some animals to be killed indiscriminately. It also provides a platform and advice for other like-minded people (especially young people) so that they can have the courage to light their own fires and raise funding for selected causes, particularly for those animals under threat that I have identified as symbolising the four elements - earth, water, air and fire."

Earth, she explains, relates to the rhino, water to the shark, air to the vulture and fire to the passion that drives her to make a difference. In June, Olivia is attempting to summit Kilimanjaro, the highest free standing mountain on earth, to raise awareness and funding for rhino and shark conservation.

"In the space of about an hour 15 000 sharks are killed worldwide for their fins and we all know the plight our rhino are facing with more than one rhino killed each day in South Africa in the first two months of 2012. Both causes are incredibly important to me and that's why I chose them as my inspiration to climb Kilimanjaro in June this year," explains Olivia.

As Olivia is anaemic and suffers from low blood pressure, she will be undergoing several tests to ensure that her iron levels are stable before the big climb and is running and playing hockey to keep her physically fit. She is also looking for sponsors who would like to support her cause.

For more details, visit www.fourelementsconservation.org, or www.beardedvulture.org.

