

Birds as food in Africa.

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Africa hosts about 2,000 bird species. Some are counted in millions, others are rare. Wild bird consumption is a protein source for the local human population. On the other hand, it can cause

health problems: some migratory birds and bush meat in general are known to be potential vectors of viruses for humans. Some birds are known to be poisonous to eat, such as Spur-winged Goose and common Quail in certain periods of the year.

Is exploitation of wild birds a “renewable resource” or, to the contrary, a deplorable act, violating conservation of biodiversity? Hunting wild birds for food in Africa is mostly uncontrolled, occurring on a large scale, and the impacts are not well documented. Although some species could easily be exploited, such as the Red-billed Quelea (may be the most abundant bird species in the world and a local pest to agriculture), it is certain that poaching can lead to local extinctions and could exterminate the rarer, larger and less widespread species. Studies note an acceleration and extend in scale and efficiency of wildlife harvest, in several African countries.

What about controlled hunting? In South Africa **legal hunting (1)** was studied (potential of some birds as a renewable resource). The University of Cape Town found that particular game birds thrive in moderate to heavily disturbed landscapes, mainly agriculture and calculated that hunting of one species of francolin yields R360 000 annually in gross revenue giving significant incentive for farmers to conserve habitat for this bird. But this message is difficult to spread and law enforcement is problematic.

Which species are targeted? **Larger species are likely to be preferred (2)** but are occurring in low density, and they are more threatened. There may be local differences in choice of target (e.g. a local **taboo on hunting the Congo Peacock, a species heavily exploited in most other areas(3)**). Some bird species are known to taste better than others and are probably preferred.

Many Palearctic birds migrate to Africa and pass **bottlenecks on their migration, where large proportions of the world population falls victim to local hunters (4)**.

The NGO BirdLife International has a joint program with hunter federations in North Africa called “Building Capacity for Sustainable Hunting of Migratory Birds”. What about domesticated bird meat? Although present, the continent is a mass importer of chicken meat. Local raising should be encouraged and modernised. Only 2 species of African birds were fully domesticated: the Ostrich and the Helmeted Guineafowl.

No new candidate for domestication for food in Africa is plausible.



1. Helmeted Guineafowl is both a common game bird in many parts of non-forested Africa and a domesticated species. It was released for food centuries ago e.g. in Madagascar and on the Comoro islands.



2. The remnants of a Hornbill (from a study on the impact of bush meat hunting in Cameroon). Hornbills are large birds, much prized as bush meat in many parts of Africa.



3. The Congo Peacock, an endemic species in the DR Congo threatened with extinction.



4. A battery of nets placed along a bottleneck of bird migration in Egypt.



5. The exotic Chicken is omnipresent in rural Africa and the dominant domesticated bird.

Further reading: Brashares J.S. et al. 2011. Economic and geographic drivers of wildlife consumption in rural Africa. PNAS 108 : 13931–13936; Crowe T. 2009. Management of southern african gamebirds: opportunities and threats. Warnell School of Forestry and Natural Resources, Athens; Mulotwa, E. : 2009. Écologie du Paon congolais *Afropavo congensis* Chapin en vue de sa conservation. Thèse de doctorat, Université de Kisangani, RD Congo; www.birdlife.org/action/change/sustainable_hunting/.

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