

## The Curse (and Blessing) of Familiar Feathers

It's funny how quickly we slip into comfort, how something once rare and thrilling can start to feel... expected. I don't say that lightly, especially when it comes to birds, and especially when it comes to the Crested Guineafowl.

For as long as I could remember, this bird had been high on my must-see list. I mean, have you *seen* them? That hairdo alone could land them a Vogue cover. Not a feather out of place, the perfect curl, the kind of natural volume most of us can only dream about, and trust me, I've tried.

I knew they weren't hard to find in the right areas, but still, I hadn't seen one in real life. So when we planned a trip to Punda Maria, I had one quiet wish, to get some solid footage of these fabulous birds. Nothing wild, just a little bucket list box ticked.

Well, life delivered early.

We'd barely unpacked at camp that first afternoon, sweat clinging to everything, claw clips holding back the day's chaos, when in they walked, a whole flock. Just like that. No mission, no early morning wake-up, no lucky corner sighting. They strolled past our chairs like they had a meeting to get to.

Snap. Snap. Snap. Got the shots.

And from that day on, they just kept coming. Every afternoon, right on cue, there they were again. I remember thinking, *I'll never get tired of this*. And I meant it. Their charm hadn't worn off, not yet. Each day felt like a bonus.

Fast forward to December. Different trip, different vibe, this time we were at Sugarloaf Camp in St Lucia. I wasn't thinking about guineafowl at all when we arrived. But as we set up camp and settled in, guess who else was already there? Yep. Another flock of Crested Guineafowl, just as confident, just as curly.

And that's when the shift happened.

Because I didn't grab my camera. I didn't leap up or whisper excitedly or run to tell anyone. I just thought, *Oh, there they are again*. It wasn't boredom, exactly. And it definitely wasn't that I didn't like seeing them. But the thrill, that electric jolt of spotting something you've longed for, it wasn't there anymore.

I started wondering if this was what birding burnout looked like. Had I become... complacent? Had I taken for granted something I used to dream about?

But maybe it's not as dramatic as that. Maybe it's not even complacency. Maybe it's just *familiarity*.

When something becomes part of your everyday, even something magical, it settles into the background. Like sunsets, still beautiful, still worth noticing, but not every single one knocks your socks off. It doesn't mean they're any less spectacular. It just means you're lucky enough to see them often.

That's what the guineafowl had become, part of the backdrop. A very glamorous, slightly ridiculous part of the backdrop. They were roosting less than 50 metres from us, calling in the early mornings, pecking through the campsite like they owned the place. And I still loved them.

Even without the goosebumps.

Because the more I thought about it, the more I realised something. The real joy wasn't just in the first sighting, the adrenaline rush, the quick-fire photos. It was in knowing they were there at all. That something once so rare to me had become regular. That I could sit under the trees, cup of tea in hand, and watch them without a rush.

There's something beautiful about that kind of birding too. The slow, familiar kind.

So no, I haven't stopped loving Crested Guineafowl. I haven't stopped noticing that crown of curls or their quirky movements or the way they glare at you like you've just insulted their style. They're still special.

Maybe even more so now, because they remind me how lucky I am.

To have seen them.

To see them often.

To live a life where even the ordinary moments are filled with birds that once felt out of reach.

Familiarity doesn't take the magic away. It just changes how you hold it.