

## What the BirdLife SA Owlet Award Means to Me

After receiving a copy of African Birdlife while on holiday in the Cape this December, I found myself taking a moment to reflect - and it brought back so many memories...

When I first heard that I'd been chosen as the recipient of the BirdLife South Africa *Owlet Award*, I was honestly speechless. To me, this award is not just a recognition of what I've done so far, but a symbol of everything I stand for - giving young people a voice in conservation and showing that age should never be a barrier to impact.

Growing up surrounded by the wild places of South Africa, I always felt that nature had a way of speaking to us, even when we weren't really listening. From the haunting call of a Fiery-necked Nightjar to the chorus of frogs after a summer storm, there's a rhythm and language in nature that most of us forget to tune into. I've always believed that conservation is, at its core, about communication - understanding that we are part of that conversation, not separate from it. The Owlet Award reminded me that my small part in helping others reconnect with nature matters.

Receiving this award from BirdLife South Africa, an organisation I've admired since I was a child, feels deeply personal. Their work represents the very essence of what I hope to achieve through Young Wildlife Photographers (YWP): to empower the next generation to not only see nature but to speak for it. For me, the award isn't a finish line; it's a doorway - one that opens into a much bigger mission to amplify youth voices in conservation spaces that have traditionally been dominated by adults.

Through YWP, I've had the privilege of meeting young people who are every bit as passionate, curious, and creative as any professional conservationist I know. They might still be figuring out how to use a camera or tell a story, but their hearts are already fully aligned with nature's cause. That's what this award represents for me: the collective energy of hundreds of young voices, all ready to stand up and say, "We care."

What I hope to do going forward is use this recognition as a platform - not just to inspire, but to open doors. Too often, youth are spoken about in conservation circles but not spoken to. We're seen as the "future," when in fact, we're already here, ready and willing to make a difference right now. My dream is to help bridge that gap by creating more spaces where young people can be heard, where their ideas are valued, and where they can grow into leaders in their own right.

Photography has been one of my greatest tools in doing that. A photograph doesn't need a title or a language to make someone pause and *feel*. It sparks empathy, curiosity, and often, a much-needed conversation. When a young photographer captures something as simple as a sunbird feeding from an aloe or a rhino standing defiant against a fading sunset, that image carries a message - that nature still has stories to tell, and we are the storytellers it depends on.

I've seen first-hand how powerful youth communication can be when it's nurtured. Whether it's through podcasts, conservation campaigns, or collaborative projects like "Mya's

Missions,” every time a young person realises that their voice holds weight, something shifts. They stop waiting for permission to care, and they start leading by example. If the Owlet Award can help me continue to create those opportunities, then its true value will lie far beyond the trophy itself.

Of course, this recognition also comes with responsibility. I feel a duty to represent not just myself, but the many young conservationists who may not yet have the platform or confidence to speak out. It reminds me that leadership isn't about being the loudest voice in the room - it's about making sure everyone else feels safe and inspired to add theirs.

So, as I look ahead, my hope is that this award becomes a reminder to others that change often begins with the courage to care out loud. That the next generation of conservationists won't have to fight to be heard but will already be part of the conversation shaping our planet's future.

To me, the Owlet Award is more than an acknowledgment; it's a promise - a promise to keep learning, to keep listening, and to keep creating pathways for youth voices to rise. It's a symbol of hope that young people can, and will, play a leading role in protecting the natural world we love so deeply. And for that, I am endlessly grateful.

A huge THANK YOU to Mark Anderson and the entire incredible team behind Birdlife South Africa. It is both an honour and a privilege.