

Why Young Birders Matter in South Africa

Birding has long been seen as a pursuit for those with years of experience, a skill that comes with time spent in the field and knowledge passed down through generations. Yet, across South Africa, a growing number of young birders are proving that passion and dedication matter just as much as experience. Despite this, they are often labeled as inexperienced or even careless, with some questioning their ability to bird ethically and responsibly.

But is that really fair? After all, every expert birder was once a beginner, and knowledge doesn't come from age alone—it comes from time, effort, and a willingness to learn. Many young birders dedicate hours to studying field guides, recording their sightings, and contributing to citizen science projects. They immerse themselves in the world of birds, yet their enthusiasm is sometimes met with scepticism. Some assume that the word 'youth' means recklessness, that younger birders are more likely to disturb birds, misuse callbacks, or disregard ethical guidelines. While mistakes happen, as they do with birders of all ages, the reality is that many young birders are highly aware of responsible birding practices. In fact, groups like the SnA Youth Birders and Young Wildlife Photographers of SA (YWP) emphasize ethical birding and photography, teaching young nature lovers how to respect the wildlife they cherish.

Interestingly, it's not always the youth who are the newbies to birding, many older individuals, including retired folk, begin their birding journeys much later in life, too. They may know far less than some young birders, yet they are often welcomed into the community with encouragement rather than doubt. If inexperience isn't about age, then why are young birders so often assumed to be the ones who need correcting?

A moment in Pafuri last September perfectly captured the contradictions in these perceptions. While exploring the Mahonie Loop, we stumbled upon an incredible sighting—Olive Bee-Eaters, a rarity in the region. Knowing what a special find this was, we reached out to other birders, both young and old, to confirm the sighting. Once we had the confirmation, we shared the news, and as expected, excitement spread quickly. Soon, birders from all over arrived, eager to catch a glimpse of the birds.

Sitting patiently in our car, we watched as the bee-eaters perched in the surrounding trees, waiting for those brief moments when we could capture a semi-decent shot through the miserable, cloudy light. And then, something ironic happened. While the younger birders remained respectful, waiting for the birds to come closer, one of the older birders—someone you'd assume to be well-versed in park regulations—hopped out of their car and walked more than 100 meters to get a better shot. So much for birding ethics! Yet time and time again, it is young birders who get blamed for breaking the rules, as if age alone determines respect for nature. That moment was a reminder that ethics aren't about how many years you've been birding but about the choices you make in the field.

The reality is that young birders are already making a difference in ways that should be recognized. They are spreading awareness, using social media to educate others, and inspiring more people to appreciate birds. They are actively contributing to citizen science by logging their sightings on platforms like BirdLasser and SABAP2, helping conservationists track

bird populations. They are engaging with their communities, introducing even younger kids to birding, and ensuring that the love of birds doesn't fade with the next generation.

Despite all this, there remains a lingering hesitation to take young birders seriously. Perhaps it is because, for so long, birding knowledge was passed down through older generations, and the idea of young people teaching themselves through modern resources feels unfamiliar. But the truth is, young birders are not here to replace the traditions of birding—they are here to add to them. They bring fresh energy, new perspectives, and an eagerness to learn that should be encouraged rather than questioned.

At the same time, birding is not just for the young or the old—it is for everyone, at any stage of life. It is for the child picking up binoculars for the first time, just as much as it is for the retiree discovering a newfound love for birds. Instead of focusing on who is new or experienced, the birding community should be a place where everyone feels welcome to learn and explore.

The next time you meet a young birder in the field, don't assume they need correcting. Start a conversation, ask them about their latest sighting, and you might be surprised by how much they know and how deeply they care. Because in the end, birding isn't just about experience—it's about passion, respect, and the joy of discovery, no matter how old you are.