

Restoring Zoo Lake's Bird Island

Background

For over 40 years the island in the centre of the Zoo Lake has been one of the most important nesting and roosting sites for a host of herons, egrets, ibises, cormorants and Darters in the greater Johannesburg area.

These species typically nest-, and roost together in communities known as heronries and islands – because of the safety barrier of water that surrounds them, are often favourite sites. Often, as in the case of the Zoo Lake heronry, these island sites can be home to hundreds of birds. This success can however have its downside!

Vegetation bends, and sometimes breaks, under the weight of the nesting and roosting birds; the nitrogen-rich droppings also foul the foliage and super-enrich the soils causing some trees to die and other to develop strange, stunted growth forms.

Both these processes have been at work on the island and as a result the number of trees is declining and in the process, so too is the space for birds to nest and roost.

Another bird-related problem on Zoo Lake at the moment is the high numbers of both domestic, and also Egyptian Geese. The populations of these two species have risen to levels where they are having a serious impact on the grass lawns around Zoo Lake.

The Plan

The first step is to try and bring the numbers of Egyptian Geese down to sustainable levels and to remove all the domestic geese from the lake. The process has already started and over forty domestic geese have been moved to other parks around Johannesburg.

The public have been encouraged to reduce the feeding of the remaining Egyptian Geese as a way of lessening the artificial support that has allowed the numbers of these birds to reach unsustainable levels.

On the island, we have treated the soil to counteract the high nitrogen levels and planted a number of new trees to augment those still growing. These new plantings will initially be protected by shade cloth shelters to prevent birds from damaging them before they become established.

In the coming months additional roosting/ nesting sites will be installed on the island. These will take the form of gum poles plated securely in the ground with several dried wattle branches firmly wired to these to create artificial “trees”. The advantage of these artificial trees is that we can very rapidly increase the number of suitable sites for birds to nest and, when the branches decay and break, we can easily replace them.

A group of birders from the St Francis Church Eco-group will be undertaking regular, twice-monthly counts of all the birds using the islands to help document our success in restoring the Zoo Lake heronry to its former glory.

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