

Aspects of Bird Behaviour

Module 5 · Online Birding Enthusiast Course · curriculum by Joe Grosel (1966–2021)

Behaviour is what turns enthusiasts into experts. The bush is a network of signals — alarm calls, courtship displays, nest building, territorial song. Learn to read the birds and you learn to read the bush.

5.1 Song vs call

Song = complex, learned, often long, mostly males, territorial and courtship. Call = short, simple, both sexes, used for contact, alarm, flight. Learn the difference and you halve your ID work.

5.2 Courtship displays

Sky-dancing (raptors), nest-swinging (weavers), aerial display flight (cisticolas, larks, pipits), bowing (doves), display feeding (terns). Most are dramatic and species-specific.

5.3 Pair bonding

Monogamy (most birds, sometimes for life — eg. African Fish-Eagle), polygyny (weavers, widowbirds — one male, multiple females), polyandry (jacanas — one female, multiple males), lekking (Black Korhaan — males gather and display, females choose).

5.4 Nest types

Cup (most passerines), dome (cisticolas), pendant (weavers), platform (raptors, doves), cavity (woodpeckers, hornbills, kingfishers), scrape (lapwings, plovers, korhaans, owls — no nest), colonial (queleas, herons, weavers, sociable weavers).

5.5 Incubation

Some birds share (raptors, hornbills), some only the female (passerines, doves), some only the male (jacanas, ostriches at night). Egg colour and pattern often match nest location for camouflage.

5.6 Alarm-call networks

Drongos, oxpeckers, francolins and many others share an alarm-call system that is read by EVERYTHING in the bush — mammals included. A fork-tailed drongo's snake alarm will move antelope. Listen for them.

5.7 Migration

Intra-African and Palaearctic migrants arrive and leave on predictable calendars. Yellow-billed Kite (Sept–Mar), Steppe Buzzard (Oct–Mar), African Paradise-Flycatcher (Aug–Apr), Lesser Spotted Eagle (Nov–Mar).

Key Terms

Lek

Communal display ground where males compete for female choice.

Brood parasite	Bird that lays eggs in another species' nest (cuckoos, honeyguides, whydahs).
Altricial	Hatched naked, blind, helpless — requires parental care.
Precocial	Hatched feathered, mobile and able to feed (chickens, lapwings).
Site fidelity	Returning to the same breeding or wintering site each year.