

WEEKLY NEWS WRAP

Summer visitor to SA expected within weeks

One of the more unusual birds of prey that occurs in South Africa, the European honey buzzard (*Pernis apivorus*), is expected to reach the country by the end of October after migrating approximately 10 000km. The species feeds exclusively on wasps, bees and hornets.

"They put themselves through enormous physical challenges twice a year on their migration route [to and] from the northern and central parts of Europe and Russia to South Africa, with little rest or food," Prof Henk Bouwman, zoologist at North-West University, said.

Speaking to *Farmer's Weekly*, he explained that the species did not breed in Africa, but migrated here to escape the harsh Northern Hemisphere winter.

While other raptors were equipped with curved claws that enabled them to firmly

grab prey animals, the European honey buzzard's claws were straight, allowing them to dig up their prey. In addition to insects, they also fed on the larvae of wasps and bees, as well as honey.

The feathers around the bird's beak and face were extremely thick to protect it against stings.

Bouwman said the latest research indicated that the birds exuded a chemical substance that acted as an insect repellent.

The birds' migration included a route via Spain to Morocco, and another over Italy to Libya. To reach Southern Africa, they flew over Israel and Turkey.

"A few years ago, a female European honey buzzard was fitted with a satellite tracking system in Finland. She spent the summer in Reitz in the Free State. With the advent of the African



The European honey buzzard makes the arduous 10 000km journey to South Africa every year. FW ARCHIVE

winter, she headed north and reached her final destination 42 days after embarking on the migration flight," Bouwman explained.

He said the good news was that European honey buzzard numbers were on the rise locally, and up to 200 000 birds could be expected in South Africa this summer.

Bouwman ascribed the increase to the effects of climate change and habitat destruction in the rest of Africa.

The European honey buzzard occurred mainly in the northern and eastern parts of South Africa, and along the eastern coast as far as Cape Town. – Annelie Coleman