SPECIAL REPORT: DR. JERRY THEIS ON THE EASTERN NICATOR!!

On my September 2014 Rockjumper Tour to South Africa, we visited Mkuze, one of the most productive birding hotspots with a wide variety of savanna, forest, and wetland habitats. As usual, I awoke before anyone else and I walked the sandy forest trails near our cabins as dawn was breaking. Soon I spotted a bird creeping through the bushes and fortunately it chose to pose on a cabin patio, giving me excellent views. It was an Eastern Nicator, normally an extremely reclusive bird. It was not seen again on the tour by the guide or any other participant.

Nicators are an African genus, including Eastern, Western, and Yellow-throated species. The E. Nicator, Nicator gularis, is endemic to sub-Saharan Africa. It has a discontinuous distribution in E. Africa from Somalia south to Eastern South Africa. Nicators habits and behavior are a blend of greenbuls and bush-shrikes. They are common residents of dense riverine and coastal forests and scrub (especially bushveld habitat with Mopane trees). Shy, skulking, unobtrusive and easily overlooked, they are forest undergrowth birds, usually seen singly, whose presence is often given away by their distinctive song, a short, rich, explosive, liquid jumble of notes that includes snatches of mimicry (we later heard one at St. Lucia but it remained hidden). They forage at all levels and occasionally glean parasites from antelopes, warthogs, zebras and Nyala, as well as often following these animals to take flushed insects. They prefer butterflies, bees, wasps, locusts and ants. These are usually hawked aerially, killed, and then eaten. They have also been observed feeding caterpillars and skinks to their young.

Nicators were initially classified as shrikes, then Bush-shrikes, then bulbuls, before being placed in their unique genus based on the position of their facial bristles, their nests, and their calls. The E. Nicator was called a bulbul, and then Yellow-spotted Nicator as recently as the 1980's. The E. Nicator has a buffy-olive breast, whitish throat

and dark eye. The back, tail and wings are overall olive in color. The yellow outer tail tips are obvious in flight. It is 20-23 cm in length and has a shrike-like, heavily hooked bill. The bright yellow spotting on the wing coverts and tertials are diagnostic. Nicator nests are flat, built of crossed twigs like that of a pigeon, and often so small and rudimentary that the eggs would seem to fall through. This fragile nest eventually becomes glued to its support by the mycelia of fungi. The Nicator lays 2-3 white eggs in a nest usually close to the ground.

The Eastern Nicator is one of the most interesting birds of lowland sand forest in southern Africa. It often acts like a Killdeer, flapping on the ground like an injured butterfly, distracting and luring intruders away from its nest or chicks. The word Nicator is of Latin origin, meaning “the conqueror.” The Zulu name for the Eastern Nicator is LOOSA, which means one that keeps watch over animals, describing its habits very well.