

# Woodpecker fossil named for Mandela on eve of his birthday

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The science world has added an unusual tribute to the long list of accolades bestowed on Nelson Mandela, naming a prehistoric woodpecker after South Africa's first black president, who turns 94 Wednesday.

The anti-apartheid icon has already seen his name conferred on a species of spider, a nuclear particle, an American rescue dog, a tree, several sub-groups of flower, numerous race horses and a flat in a television sitcom.

The latest on the list is *Australopicus nelsonmandelai*, a [woodpecker](#) species whose remains were unearthed by French and [German scientists](#)

at the Langebaanweg fossil site on South Africa's southwest coast.

This is not just any old woodpecker -- it is the oldest type ever found on the African continent.

"We have named the new species after Nelson Mandela -- a sort of scientific present for his 94th birthday," said Albrecht Manegold from the Senckenberg Research Institute in Frankfurt.

*Australopicus nelsonmandelai* is believed to have lived in the early Pliocene period about five to three million years ago. It was related to woodpecker species alive in the Americas and Eurasia today, and not to those found in Africa.

"The new taxon represents a previously unknown fourth lineage of African woodpeckers of Eurasian origin that probably became isolated on the [African continent](#) as a result of environmental changes," said a report on the find published in the [Journal of Vertebrate Paleontology](#).

The scientists said their find provided evidence for the theory that the Langebaanweg area, now dominated by a type of shrubland vegetation known as fynbos, had been a riverine forest in the Pliocene period.

Mandela, jailed for 27 years by the apartheid South African government for his fight against its racist policies, has had hundreds of structures and awards named after him in his home country and the rest of the continent as well as Europe, the Americas and Asia.

They include streets, municipalities, bridges, squares, parks and gardens... even a landfill site in Guyana, according to a website run by Mandela's charitable foundation.

Mandela is unlikely to attend any of the host of celebrations being held

in his honour on Wednesday, as the frail Nobel peace prize-winner has increasingly vanished from the public eye.

Last week, President Jacob Zuma described him as being in "good health".

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