



MEDIA RELEASE

For immediate use

SATELLITE TRACKING TO ASSIST IN THE CONSERVATION OF SOUTH AFRICA'S SECRETARYBIRDS

Johannesburg, 3 July 2012: BirdLife South Africa, the largest dedicated bird conservation NGO in South Africa, the Endangered Wildlife Trust's Birds of Prey Programme (EWT-BoPP), and the University of the Witwatersrand have launched a collaborative satellite tracking project on one of South Africa's most charismatic raptors, the Secretarybird.

The Secretarybird has a wide distribution, occurring throughout sub-Saharan Africa in different habitat types, except for areas covered by forests and true deserts. The Secretarybird was recently up-listed on the international Red Data List to *Vulnerable*, as it is threatened by a number of factors throughout its range. These include habitat fragmentation and degradation through agricultural and commercial forestry development, collisions with power lines and farm fences, and secondary poisoning. The continued survival of this iconic species, easily identifiable by its long legs and erectile crest, is under threat in South Africa. A preliminary analysis of information collected during the two bird atlas projects (<http://sabap2.adu.org.za/>) shows a considerable reduction in the areas this species previously occupied in South Africa.

The EWT-BoPP and BirdLife South Africa initiated a collaborative project to gain a better understanding of the Secretarybird's biology. Although Secretarybirds are large and visible birds, very little is known about their home range size, juvenile dispersal, and which habitats they prefer.

The tracking project, a costly exercise, will provide detailed information on the species' movements and habits. These devices cost in the region of R25 000 apiece. The tracking device, using cell phone tracking with GPS technology, collects data every 15 minutes, is accurate to within 6-10 metres, and downloads the data via the GSM cellular network.

"The project will enable us to better understand the biology of the Secretarybird, and should help determine why they are no longer doing well in the grasslands and other habitats in South Africa and enable us to make better informed decisions on appropriate conservation action to benefit the species." says André Botha, Manager of the Birds of Prey Programme of the Endangered Wildlife Trust.

BirdLife South Africa will focus its efforts in the grasslands, while the EWT-BoPP will focus its efforts in the Kalahari region of the Northern Cape and the savannas of the Lowveld and the Kruger National Park. The combined data will allow comparisons to be made, and the research findings will lead to considered conservation action and ultimately contribute to countering the current decline in numbers and decrease in range of this species.



Ernst Retief, BirdLife South Africa Regional Conservation Manager for Gauteng and North West says, “The first tracking device has been fitted to a Secretarybird fledgling on the farm Garingboom near Springfontein in the Free State on 22 March 2012. The fledgling called *Spyker* is sponsored by Radio OFM and its movements can be followed at <http://www.birdlife.org.za/conservation/threatened-species/secretarybird>. *Spyker* has moved around quite extensively since leaving the nest.”

The harnesses were tested on captive Secretarybirds to make sure that they fit correctly and therefore to prevent any side-effects.

Dr Hanneline Smit, BirdLife South Africa Conservation Manager/Oppenheimer Fellow of Conservation, says: “In this short amount of time since fitting the device to *Spyker*, our knowledge on juvenile dispersal and behaviour has increased immensely.” She asked farmers and birders to let BirdLife South Africa and the EWT identify breeding sites in the target areas, to enable the conservation teams to fit further tracking devices to fledglings later this year.

The devices are best fitted to 8 – 9 week fledglings and are expected to last for a minimum of two and a half years should the fledglings survive to adulthood. Given the numerous threats faced by this species, we also request the public to report mortalities.

For more information on the EWT – Birds of Prey Programme (EWT-BOPP) work on the Secretarybird contact André Botha at 082 962 5725 or andreb@ewt.org.za

For more information on BirdLife South Africa’s Secretarybird conservation in the grasslands, e-mail Hanneline Smit conservation@birdlife.org.za or Ernst Retief conservation.gauteng@birdlife.org.za or call 011-7891122.

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South Africa has 844 bird species, of which 65 species only occur here and 125 (15%) are listed in *The Eskom Red Data Book of Birds of South Africa, Lesotho and Swaziland* (Barnes 2000). With one of the highest levels of bird endemism in the world, South Africa has an important obligation to ensure their survival.

About BirdLife South Africa

The vision of BirdLife South Africa is to promote the conservation, research, understanding, observation of and enjoyment of natural birds, and their habitats. BirdLife South Africa is the largest



non-profit bird conservation organization in the country. It relies on donor funding and financial support from the public to carry out its critical conservation work. BirdLife South Africa contact details: Lewis House, 239 Barkston Drive, Blairgowrie, P.O. Box 515, Randburg, Johannesburg, South Africa, Tel. +27-11-7891122, Fax. +27-11-7895188, e-mail address: conservation@birdlife.org.za, website: www.birdlife.org.za

About the Endangered Wildlife Trust

The Endangered Wildlife Trust (EWT) is dedicated to conserving threatened species and ecosystems in southern Africa to the benefit of all people. Our Vision is a healthy planet and an equitable world that values and sustains diversity of all life. The EWT was established in 1973 and is registered as a Non-Profit Organisation. The EWT fills the key niche of on the ground conservation action. We identify the key factors threatening biodiversity and develop innovative methodologies and best practice guidelines to reduce these and promote harmonious co-existence and sustainable living for both people and wildlife. We achieve our goals through specialist programmes, and our skilled field staff are deployed regionally and throughout southern Africa. The EWT is a proud member of the International Union for Conservation of Nature and the United Nations Global Compact. Visit www.ewt.org.za for further information. The Endangered Wildlife Trust's contact details: Pinelands Office Park, Ardeer Road, Modderfontein, Private Bag X11, Modderfontein, 1645; Tel: +27-11-372-3600, Fax: +27-11-608-4682, e-mail address: raptors@ewt.org.za, website: www.ewt.org.za