



MEDIA RELEASE

For immediate use

Tracking Grey-headed Gull movements around O.R. Tambo International Airport, Johannesburg

Johannesburg, 6 September 2017:

Bird strikes with aircraft cost the international aviation industry millions of dollars per annum as a result of direct damage to aircraft and indirectly due to delays caused by aircraft down time.

BirdLife South Africa and its collaborators, Airports Company South Africa's (ACSA's) O.R. Tambo International Airport and Albert Froneman Consulting, are working towards gaining a better understanding of the movements of Grey-headed Gulls which congregate around the airfield in large numbers during the winter months, while breeding on the surrounding pans and wetlands adjacent to the airport.

O.R. Tambo International Airport has a world class wildlife hazard management programme that works to mitigate the impacts that birds and other wildlife pose to arriving and departing aircraft on the airfield. Over the past 17 years, bird collision data have indicated that Grey-headed Gulls are a high risk species at the airport. As the gulls often congregate in large numbers near the periphery of the airport and occasionally venture onto the airfield, it is particularly difficult to mitigate the risks they pose as potential bird strike victims.

Little is currently known about the local and large scale movements of Grey-headed Gulls at both a local and seasonal scale, thus limiting the development of effective bird strike mitigation strategies. In order to gain a better understanding of the movements of the Grey-headed Gulls, a tracking study has been initiated. After careful research and testing of harness design and fitment method, three Grey-headed Gulls were captured and fitted with light-weight, solar charged, tracking units to provide 15 minute point-locations throughout the day. The birds, a female and two males, have been named Embraer, Boeing and Antonov respectively.

Once a better understanding of the Grey-headed Gull movements has been established, a targeted management strategy will be developed and implemented to reduce the risk that these birds pose to aircraft at O.R. Tambo International Airport.

Maps of the tracked birds' movements will be available on the BirdLife South Africa website (<https://www.birdlife.org.za/conservation/terrestrial-bird-conservation>).

BirdLife South Africa is proud to be associated with Airports Company South Africa's O.R. Tambo International Airport in this new and exciting research.

For more information contact:

Dr Hanneline Smit-Robinson at conservation@birdlife.org.za (011 789 1122)

Mr Albert Froneman at albert.froneman@gmail.com (082 901 4016)

Mrs Melissa Hofmann at Melissa.Hofmann@airports.co.za (072 210 4898)

Dr Melissa Whitecross at melissa.whitecross@birdlife.org.za (011 789 1122)

Copies of the images below can be requested from Melissa Whitecross.

Notes to Editors:

BirdLife South Africa

1. The mission of BirdLife South Africa is to conserve birds, their habitats and biodiversity through scientifically-based programmes, through supporting the sustainable and equitable use of natural resources and through encouraging people to enjoy and value nature.
2. BirdLife South Africa contact details: Isdell House, 17 Hume Road, Dunkeld West 2196, Gauteng
Private Bag X5000, Parklands 2121, Johannesburg, Gauteng, South Africa, Tel. +27-11-7891122, Fax. +27-11-7895188, e-mail address: info@birdlife.org.za, website: www.birdlife.org.za

Research permits

This project has been approved by the Gauteng Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (Permit Number: CPF6-000203) and undergone stringent ethical clearance by the BirdLife South Africa Ethics Committee (Application Number: 2017_01_B).



Melissa Hofmann (Senior Wildlife Officer, O.R. Tambo International Airport) releases one of the Grey-headed Gulls near the Airport after the tracking device had been attached. (photo: Albert Froneman)



A flock of Grey-headed Gulls flushes as members of the capture team approach the capture nets. (photo: Albert Froneman)



Dr Hanneline Smit-Robinson (BirdLife South Africa) and Gail Schaum assisting Craig Natrass to attach the tracker and body harness to one of the Grey-headed Gulls. (photo: Albert Froneman)