

MEDIA RELEASE

Embargo: 12h00, Saturday 17 February 2018

Breaking news: second global breeding locality discovered for Critically Endangered flufftail

The White-winged Flufftail is one of the world's rarest birds. Destruction and degradation of the species' high altitude grassland habitat have resulted in a situation where its survival in the wild is uncertain. There is a race against time to ensure that it does not become the first African bird to go extinct, following the same fate as North America's Passenger Pigeon and Mauritius' Dodo. Through the use of a novel survey method, BirdLife South Africa's research team has this month discovered the first breeding of the threatened White-winged Flufftail in South Africa, contradicting prior thought that this flufftail is a non-breeding visitor to South African wetlands.

The White-winged Flufftail is only known to occur with any regularity in Ethiopia and South Africa, more than 4000 km apart. The species is found in high altitude wetlands in the eastern parts of South Africa from November to March. It then breeds in Ethiopia, in the northern hemisphere, during July and August. Prior to the recent discovery, the only known breeding site was Berga wetland in Ethiopia.

The implementation of a conservation plan (International White-winged Flufftail Single Species Action Plan) through the collaborative efforts of BirdLife South Africa, Middelpunt Wetland Trust and the Ethiopian Wildlife and Natural History Society (The BirdLife Partner in Ethiopia) is being undertaken under the auspices of the White-winged Flufftail International Working Group, African Eurasian Waterbird Agreement (AEWA). However, the successful conservation of this species is dependent on a better understanding of the birds' biology and movements.

Over the past two years BirdLife South Africa's Robin Colyn and ecologist Alastair Campbell have developed an innovative method to survey this cryptic and elusive species. Dubbed the BirdLife South Africa Rallid Survey Method (Colyn et al. 2017, *Ostrich* 88: 235-245), it uses a cleverly designed camera trap system to record the secret life of the White-winged Flufftail. Working at Middelpunt Wetland near Belfast, in 2016/17 they recorded interesting wing-flapping behaviour during which both males and females display their white wing feathers. In 2017/18, the survey technique was further refined. The most exciting discovery was photographing recently hatched chicks and juvenile White-winged Flufftails. At least two breeding attempts were recorded, with chicks ranging from only a couple of days old to juvenile birds which were about four weeks old. This confirms that the White-winged Flufftail is not a "non-breeding visitor" to South Africa, says Robin Colyn, one of BirdLife South Africa's ornithologists and lead on the development of the novel survey method.

A scientific study, published a week ago, authored by BirdLife South Africa and National Zoological Gardens geneticists has showed that South African and Ethiopian birds are genetically similar, with only three minor sequence variations between the two populations (Dalton et al. 2018, *African Journal of Ecology* 56: 28-37).

We are still unsure what our findings mean for White-winged Flufftail conservation. Our survey method did however confirm a low abundance and, therefore, until further knowledge, our assumption holds that this species is extremely rare and it remains on the brink of extinction, says Dr Hanneline Smit-Robinson, BirdLife South Africa's Terrestrial Bird Conservation Programme Manager. She adds that BirdLife South Africa would like to expand its use of the newly developed Rallid Survey Method to at least another three wetlands in South Africa to confirm the presence of, and hopefully breeding by, White-winged Flufftails at these sites. A donation of R4000 for each camera would help us to reach our target of buying another 60 camera traps for use in the 2018/19 breeding seasons. A further call by BirdLife South Africa is to raise funds to support the conservation initiatives that would ultimately protect the important habitats used by this wetland specialist. Please visit the BirdLife South Africa website (www.birdlife.org.za) or email conservation@birdlife.org.za for further information. Anyone wishing to donate towards this important conservation work can either deposit funds directly to BirdLife South Africa (FNB, Acc. No.: 62067506281, Branch: 250655) using the reference *WWF_YourInitials&Surname*, or can use the online payment platform accessed via www.birdlife.org.za/support-us/donate where the White-winged Flufftail tab can be selected as the chosen cause.

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Full references:

1. Colyn R, Campbell A, Smit-Robinson HA. 2017. The application of camera trapping to assess rallidae species richness within wetland habitat types, eastern Free State, South Africa. *Ostrich* 88: 235-245.
2. Dalton DL, Smit-Robinson HA, Vermaak E, Jarvis E, Kotzé A. 2017. Is there genetic connectivity among the Critically Endangered Whited-winged Flufftail (*Sarothrura ayresi*) populations from South Africa and Ethiopia? *African Journal of Ecology* 56: 28-37.

More on Ethiopia

Few bird species breed at only one locality, which puts the White-winged Flufftail at significant extinction risk. For the past 14 years, the Ethiopian BirdLife partner, the Ethiopian Wildlife and Natural History Society, together with Middelpunt Wetland Trust and Rockjumper Worldwide Birding Adventures, have worked with the community at Berga to ensure that the wetland is protected from grazing by cattle, horses and sheep during the flufftail breeding season in the boreal summer. At the



same time, initiatives led by BirdLife South Africa have attempted to conserve high altitude wetland sites known to host this species in South Africa.

BirdLife South Africa

BirdLife South Africa is the country partner of BirdLife International, a global partnership of conservation organisations that strives to conserve birds, their habitats and global biodiversity, by working with people towards sustainability in the use of natural resources. BirdLife International partners operate in more than 125 countries and territories worldwide. BirdLife South Africa relies on donor funding and financial support from the public to carry out its critical conservation work.

BirdLife South Africa's Terrestrial Bird Conservation Programme

BirdLife South Africa's Terrestrial Bird Conservation Programme aims to conserve diverse and sustainable bird populations, recognising their crucial role in maintaining balanced terrestrial ecosystems. Our mission is to identify, prevent and/or reverse negative trends in terrestrial birds through scientifically-based conservation initiatives. BirdLife South Africa's novel rallid survey method research is supported by Department of Environmental Affairs, Airports Company South Africa and Eskom (Ingula Partnership), whilst the KEM-JV Fellow of Conservation is supported by funding from Kimberley Ekapa Mining Joint Venture.

Collaboration between BirdLife South Africa, Middelpunt Wetland Trust, AEWA and EWNHS

The implementation of a conservation plan through the collaborative efforts of BirdLife South Africa, Middelpunt Wetland Trust and the Ethiopian Wildlife and Natural History Society (EWNHS - The BirdLife Partner in Ethiopia) is being undertaken under the auspices of the African Eurasian Waterbird Agreement (AEWA). More information is available on the BirdLife South Africa website.