

POSITION STATEMENT

Tracking of wild birds

PROBLEM STATEMENT

Movement and ecological data obtained through the fitting of satellite/GSM/VHF tracking devices to birds can ultimately aid the conservation of the species. The inherent risks of handling birds and attaching of devices to the individual birds should always be minimised.

BIRDLIFE SOUTH AFRICA POSITION STATEMENT

- BirdLife South Africa endeavours to lead the way in implementing ethical tracking studies that underpins the organisation's mission of protecting wild birds and their habitats.
- The data obtained from tracking a bird should contribute to the conservation of the species and lead to the implementation of conservation measures.
- All projects that involve the handling of birds and their subsequent tracking should comply with the relevant provincial legislation in South Africa.
- Ethical clearance is compulsory and should be obtained from a minimum of one suitable ethics committee, before permit applications are considered. We strongly recommend that the project application be submitted to the BirdLife South Africa's Ethics Committee for review, in addition to obtaining ethical clearance from an affiliated institution.
- The ad hoc fitment of tracking devices where the research questions are unclear is considered unethical.
- The impact on the bird should be kept to a minimum, both during capture, the fitment process and deployment. Handling time should be kept to a minimum as the event can be stressful to the bird while it is being handled. Fitting of tracking devices should only be undertaken by people who are experienced and competent in the capturing and handling of the relevant species and the fitting of the tracking device, and who have the necessary permits to undertake the work.
- A device should never weigh more than 3% of the body weight of the bird on which it is being deployed.
- Despite cost considerations, the type of device used must be of sufficient standard and quality to provide the required data over the full period of the study. Before the device is used or made available for use, it must undergo quality tests by a reputable company to minimise the chance of fitting a faulty device to a bird.
- Researchers and specialists using tracking devices are encouraged to share/publish lessons learnt, including with regards to types of devices, fitment methods and harnesses, in an effort to improve tracking methods and techniques.
- Methods of attachment (e.g. harnesses) should be tested on appropriately-housed captive birds before a bird in the wild is fitted with a tracking device, especially if the relevant species has not been tracked before. If the same bird species cannot be found in captivity, a species of similar size and behaviour can be considered.
- The fitment of a tracking device is an exciting event and, although such an event represents an opportunity to get media coverage and promote the project, the welfare of the bird should always come first and handling time must be minimised.
- To inform future guidance, any mortalities or injuries, whether attributed to the fitting of tracking device or not, should be reported to the relevant provincial organisation as well as the BirdLife South Africa Ethics Committee.