

MEDIA RELEASE

Embargo: 12h00, Saturday 8 December 2018

Breaking News: One of the greatest mysteries about the Critically Endangered White-winged Flufftail solved

One of the greatest ornithological mysteries, representing more than a decade's work, has been solved! The White-winged Flufftail is one of Africa's rarest and most threatened wetland birds. It is largely restricted to high-altitude wetland habitats in South Africa and Ethiopia. The current population is estimated to number only 200 and 250 birds and, in light of habitat loss and degradation over the past 10 years, this species faces a significant risk of extinction. Owing to the White-winged Flufftail's secretive and elusive behaviour, it is regarded as one of the most enigmatic species in Africa. Through the development and implementation of novel and innovative research and monitoring methods, BirdLife South Africa's scientists have made numerous breakthroughs that have contributed to our understanding of this Critically Endangered species. The greatest of which has been the identification and recording of the species' call for the first time, which, together with the discovery of its breeding in South Africa earlier this year, has reshaped our understanding of, and ability to, conserve the White-winged Flufftail.

The species was first discovered and described in 1877 by Thomas Ayres and John H. Gurney. However, since its discovery over 140 years ago, numerous aspects of its ecology, behaviour and status have largely remained veiled in mystery. The gaps in our understanding related to this species are such, that it is one of the only southern African bird species for which we do not have an undisputed record of its call.

Previous 'oop' vocalisations attributed to the White-winged Flufftail have been disputed in the past due to their similarity to the roosting call of the Grey Crowned Crane, which is often observed in the same wetlands as the White-winged Flufftail. The presumed belief that this species was largely silent has been one of the main stumbling blocks hindering the ability to survey the presence of this species across its range. Bird calls are used worldwide to record the presence and even determine population sizes of various species.

Over the past three years, BirdLife South Africa's Robin Colyn and Eskom's ecologist Alastair Campbell have been leading the development of a novel innovative monitoring system, dubbed the BirdLife South Africa Rallid Survey Method (Colyn et al. 2017, *Ostrich* 88: 235-245, Colyn et al. 2018, *Bird Conservation International* in press), for the White-winged Flufftail and other rare and elusive ground dwelling wetland birds, specifically focused on targeting flufftail species. This system involved the use of both camera and acoustic equipment and was deployed in the wetlands during the summer months during the previous three years.

In February 2018, a call was identified by Robin Colyn through the acoustic monitoring system at a South African wetland that did not match any known calls on record. The unknown call corresponded to photographs taken simultaneously by carefully placed camera "traps". These photos showed a male White-winged Flufftail exhibiting territorial behaviour. Robin Colyn explains "The call was unique in that it differed significantly from most other flufftail species and occurred within an extremely low frequency range, making it very difficult to distinguish amongst the wetland soundscape of other birds and frogs".

Further scrutiny of the very large dataset of bird recordings yielded more than a dozen such records and provided the foundation that was used to solve one of the greatest ornithological bird mysteries in Africa. In August 2018 the soft staccato clicking that is now attributed to White-winged Flufftail was also successfully recorded in the breeding grounds in Ethiopia and has confirmed this vocalisation on both extremities of the species' range in Africa by the BirdLife South Africa team (Robin Colyn, Dr Melissa Whitecross and Caroline Howes).

The breakthroughs achieved are crucial in informing our understanding of the conservation status and requirements of this threatened species. As a result, BirdLife South Africa is able to more efficiently direct conservation efforts and resources to promote the persistence of this species across the continent.



BirdLife South Africa and the Middelpunt Wetland Trust (a trust started solely for the conservation of White-winged Flufftail and its habitat), in collaboration with other institutions, have rolled out a number of research projects to focus on the conservation of the White-winged Flufftail.

Malcom Drummond, one of the founding members of the Middelpunt Wetland Trust, expressed his feelings about this discovery: “Over the years, many different techniques, mostly time-consuming and intrusive, have been used to try and ascertain whether or not White-winged Flufftails are present at a wetland. Audio detection brings a whole new dimension to site identification, allowing many more sites to be non-intrusively investigated with far greater accuracy.”

BirdLife South Africa would like to acknowledge the generous funding and support provided by the Department of Environmental Affairs (DEA), Eskom (Ingula Partnership), Airports Company South Africa and the BirdLife International Species Champion for the White-winged Flufftail - Rockjumper Birding Adventures.

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Full References:

1. Colyn, R.B., Campbell, A.M. and Smit-Robinson, H.A. (2017) The application of camera trapping to assess Rallidae species richness within palustrine wetland habitat in South Africa. *Ostrich* 88(3): 1-11.
2. Colyn, R.B., Campbell, A.M. and Smit-Robinson, H.A. (2018) Camera-trapping successfully and non-invasively reveals the presence, activity and habitat choice of the Critically Endangered White-winged Flufftail *Sarothrura ayresi* in a South African high-altitude wetland. *Bird Conservation International: In press*.

Additional Information:

More on the call of the White-winged Flufftail

The White-winged Flufftail is a Critically Endangered African wetland bird whose call, until now, has not been known to science. Owing to the sensitivity of the species, BirdLife South Africa has taken the decision to not release the audio files of the call to the broader public, however, the sonogram of the vocalisation will be published in a peer-reviewed scientific article in early 2019. BirdLife South Africa recognises that some people may find this decision frustrating, however, the well-being of the White-winged Flufftail has to be prioritised given the extreme sensitivity of this species to disturbance.

Critically Endangered

The International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) was established in 1964 and provides the most comprehensive information source on the global conservation status of animal, plant and fungi species via their Red List of Threatened Species. The Red List provides an assessment of a species risk of extinction based on several factors including global population size, geographic distribution, and threats. Species listed in the Critically Endangered category face the highest risk of extinction and require urgent conservation intervention. Owing to its small estimated population size (< 250 individuals) and the restricted distribution of suitable high altitude wetlands, the White-winged Flufftail was uplisted to globally Critically Endangered in 2013.

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, Eskom (Ingula Partnership), Airports Company South Africa and Rockjumper Birding Adventures, whilst the KEM-JV Fellow of Conservation is supported by funding from Kimberley Ekapa Mining Joint Venture.

More on Ethiopia

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.

Collaboration between AEWA, national state authorities, BirdLife South Africa and Middelpunt Wetland Trust

The role of the AEWA White-winged Flufftail International Working Group is to coordinate and catalyse the implementation of a 10-year action programme: the International White-winged Flufftail Single Species Action Plan (ISSAP), developed in 2008. Whilst the AEWA White-winged Flufftail International Working Group comprises designated representatives of national state authorities (Ethiopia and South Africa), representatives of conservation organisations are invited to join the national delegations. These include staff/trustees of BirdLife South Africa, Middelpunt Wetland Trust, the South African National Zoological Garden, SANBI and the Ethiopian Wildlife and Natural History Society. A national White-winged Flufftail working group is hosted by the Department of Environmental Affairs in South Africa.

As part of BirdLife International's Preventing Extinctions Programme, BirdLife South Africa's Dr Hanneline Smit-Robinson has been directing numerous conservation initiatives under the auspices of the AEWA (African



Eurasian Migratory Waterbird Agreement) White-winged Flufftail International Working Group. Coordinated by BirdLife South Africa, a side event focused on recent research and conservation action on the White-winged Flufftail was held this week at the 7th Meeting of the Parties (MoP) to AEWA in Durban, South Africa from 4 to 8 December 2018.

Support the conservation of the White-winged Flufftail

BirdLife South Africa's work is made possible through the generous donation of funds from a diversity of companies, organisations and individuals. 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.