

MEDIA RELEASE

Embargo: 18:00 on 15 February 2019

It was not just a fluke! White-winged Flufftails are breeding in South Africa again!

Last year, BirdLife South Africa's work on the Critically Endangered White-winged Flufftail uncovered two major scientific breakthroughs for the species, which have been integral milestones in furthering the conservation of this very rare bird. The first ever breeding record, outside of the known sites in Ethiopia, was discovered at Middelpunt Wetland, Mpumalanga, in early 2018 and, later that year, the first recordings of the call of the White-winged Flufftail were made in both South Africa and Ethiopia. Prior to these two discoveries, the species was thought to be a non-breeding, silent, summer migrant to South Africa. Through the development and implementation of novel and innovative research and monitoring methods, BirdLife South Africa has once again been able to confirm that breeding White-winged Flufftails have been recorded at Middelpunt Wetland, thus confirming the species as a regular breeding bird in South Africa. BirdLife South Africa's work has resulted in the need to rewrite the field guides and history books for this elusive wetland bird and has reshaped our understanding of, and ability to, conserve the White-winged Flufftail.

The White-winged Flufftail is only known to occur with any regularity in high-altitude wetlands of Ethiopia and South Africa. The species has only been found in South Africa during the austral summer months (November to March), while its presence in Ethiopia has been recorded during July to September. It was therefore considered a migrant, flying the 4 000 km between these two known regions. Prior to BirdLife South Africa's discovery of breeding birds in Middelpunt Wetland, Mpumalanga, South Africa, the only known, current breeding site was Berga Wetland in Ethiopia.

To further the understanding of these elusive birds, BirdLife South Africa's Robin Colyn and Eskom ecologist Alastair Campbell developed an innovative method to survey cryptic and elusive wetland species. This technique was dubbed the BirdLife South Africa Rallid Survey Method (Colyn et al. 2017, *Ostrich* 88: 235-245) and it uses a cleverly-designed camera trap and audio recording system to capture the secret life of the White-winged Flufftail, as well as other wildlife living within these difficult-to-access habitats.

During the current monitoring season, which commenced in October 2018, confirmation of at least two pairs of White-winged Flufftails showing territorial behaviour have been captured, as well as an additional breeding record.

The confirmation of a second season of breeding White-winged Flufftails at Middelpunt Wetland adds significant evidence that the species is in fact a breeding bird for South Africa and further strengthens the need to conserve the key sites for this species within the country. 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. Much of this conservation work has been driven towards the implementation of a conservation plan, which is being implemented under the auspices of the African Eurasian Waterbird Agreement (AEWA).

BirdLife South Africa's work on the Critically Endangered White-winged Flufftail is undertaken with the support of a range of donors and collaborators, including the Department of Environmental Affairs (DEA), Eskom (Ingula Partnership), Airports Company South Africa, Kimberley Ekapa Mining JV, Dullstroom Trout Farm, Middelpunt Wetland Trust, the National Zoological Garden of South Africa and Rockjumper Birding Tours.

As part of their commitment to supporting the conservation of the White-winged Flufftail, BirdLife International Species Champion and Rockjumper Birding Tours arranged an exciting fundraiser aimed at raising the profile of the species and generating much-needed funds for its conservation. This fundraiser took the form of the *Kruger*



Birding & Wildlife Challenge, a ten-day adventure through the iconic Kruger National Park, South Africa, from 6-15 February 2019. Eight teams, including 45 international delegates, competed to see which team could record the highest number of bird and mammal species during the friendly challenge, while covering the reserve from south to north. All proceeds raised during the event will be donated to Middelpunt Wetland Trust to continue the conservation of the White-winged Flufftail.

For more information contact:

Robin Colyn

KEM-JV Fellow of Conservation, Birdlife South Africa

Email: robin.colyn@birdlife.org.za

Phone: 076 833 8454

or

Dr Hanneline Smit-Robinson, Manager: Terrestrial Bird Conservation Programme/Oppenheimer Fellow of Conservation, BirdLife South Africa.

Email: conservation@birdlife.org.za

Phone: 011 789 1122/082 453 4714

or

Dr Melissa Whitecross

Threatened Species Project Manager

Email: melissa.whitecross@birdlife.org.za

Phone: 011 789 1122/082 452 6021

Website: <https://www.birdlife.org.za/conservation/terrestrial-bird-conservation/threatened-species/white-winged-flufftail>

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.