

POSITION STATEMENT

Raptors and Climbing

PROBLEM STATEMENT

Recreational climbing has grown in popularity in recent decades and it is inevitable that the sport will take climbers into ever more remote, inaccessible areas where they can test their skills. Owing to their stability and remoteness, cliffs and rocky outcrops form the ideal breeding habitat for a variety of raptors and other cliff-nesting species. Numerous studies have shown that cliff-nesting birds can be sensitive to disturbance, to the point of breeding failure and even territory abandonment (Tarboton, 1983; Brambille et al., 2004; Arroyo & Razin, 2006). Climbers may cause disturbance by flushing breeding birds from their nests (thereby exposing nests to predation and weather extremes), disrupting feeding routines and/or forcing young birds to fledge prematurely (Attarian & Keith, 2008). Such disturbances can have serious consequences for threatened, slow reproducing species that are struggling to deal with a suite of other negative environmental factors.

BIRDLIFE SOUTH AFRICA POSITION STATEMENT

BirdLife South Africa is not opposed to climbing as a recreational sport, as long as it is conducted in a manner that is cognisant of the impact the activity may have on the welfare of other species that depend on these areas for their own survival.

BirdLife South Africa recommends that cliff-nesting birds are protected from the possible impacts of rock climbing by the implementation of spatial and temporal buffer zones, especially during the breeding seasons of the affected species. These buffer zones should be site-specific, and implemented within the following parameters:

1. Buffer zones should be designed to provide visual and auditory barriers against disturbance of nesting birds. Consideration should be given to the climbing route's vertical and horizontal proximity to the nest, as well as physical characteristics such as topography and vegetation that could act as effective line-of sight barriers.
2. The exact dates of nest-site closures should be based on the breeding ecology of the relevant species.

3. The general health and status of a specific population should be considered. During years of extreme drought and the resultant scarcity of food, spatial barriers should be expanded considerably.
4. The extent to which individual birds have been habituated to human presence should be considered, as well as the sensitivity of certain species to disturbance in general.

BirdLife South Africa recommends that all route closures be accompanied by public education drives in the form of media releases, signs at trail heads, email notices to climbing clubs, social media and other online climbing communities. Protected nests should be monitored and sites opened once the breeding season is over.

Climbers are encouraged to participate in the conservation effort of large cliff-nesting bird species by joining volunteer monitoring groups, which could also contribute to the management of a particular climbing route.