

## The Ingula Partnership



## MEDIA RELEASE

For immediate use

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### **Ingula Partnership wins the Stewardship category at the South African Wetland Society Awards**

*The Ingula Partnership is a collaboration between BirdLife South Africa, Eskom and the Middelpunt Wetland Trust which was established in 2004 to provide environmental awareness, support and monitoring throughout the planning, construction and into the operational phase of the Ingula Pumped Storage Scheme on the border of the Free State and KwaZulu-Natal. The Ingula Partnership was formed after several non-governmental organisations opposed the construction of the proposed dams which would alter the sensitive wetlands and grasslands that host many threatened birds and mammals unique to South Africa's Grassland Biome. By working together through the planning, construction and implementation phases, the Ingula Partnership has provided a shining example of how initially opposing parties could come together to ensure that this development did not negatively impact on the overall biodiversity and environmental integrity of the area. In 2018 the area surrounding the Ingula Pumped Storage Scheme was declared a nature reserve under the Protected Areas Act, Act 57 of 2003 and will now offer long-term protection to the important grasslands and wetlands which initially sparked this unlikely alliance. In recognition of the custodianship shown and the subsequent conservation success which has arisen from it, The Ingula Partnership was declared the winner of the Stewardship category at the 2019 South African Wetland Awards on 10 October 2019.*

In 2002 South Africa's power producer, Eskom Holdings SOC Ltd, had proposed to expand its current network of power producing facilities to include the construction of the Braamhoek Pumped Storage Scheme (PPS), now named the Ingula PSS. However, Eskom faced a dilemma when the Environmental Authorisation for the proposed project was withdrawn after opposing non-governmental organisations (NGOs), including BirdLife South Africa and Middelpunt Wetland Trust, highlighted the presence of several threatened fauna and flora, including the *Critically Endangered* White-winged Flufftail (*Sarothrura ayresi*). In addition to this, the environmental impact assessment (EIA) showed that the ecosystem within the proposed site was vulnerable to over utilisation and degradation of the wetlands.

Eskom approached the organisations which had originally opposed the development and proposed a collaborative approach that would allow these NGOs to work with Eskom throughout the planning, construction and operation of the PSS, with the major aim of this collaboration to ensure that the sensitive wetlands and their biodiversity were conserved. Ms. Deidre Herbst, Eskom's Environmental Manager commented that "the value of partnerships is often underestimated and so much more was achieved in the name of conservation and sustainable development because of the Partnership between Eskom, BirdLife South Africa and the Middelpunt Wetland Trust. The Partnership also facilitated input from several other key stakeholders". The development was then authorised with the initiation of 'The Ingula Partnership' that brought together Eskom, BirdLife South Africa and the Middelpunt Wetland Trust and saw Eskom's purchase of 8 000 ha of farmland surrounding the upper wetland. The Record of Decision required that this land should be managed for the purpose of conservation. The Partnership became responsible for ensuring that the impacts of construction were sufficiently mitigated, to enhance the environment. The construction footprint was also limited and revisions to the design were implemented to optimise the hydrological aspects of the project and reduce its visual impacts.

Construction commenced in 2005 with regular input and intervention from The Partnership ensuring that all personnel on site, including the 4 500 construction contractors and supervisors, were aware of the potential impacts their activities could have on the environment. Regular monitoring of the biodiversity across the site's grasslands, wetlands and forests by Eskom environmental staff and BirdLife South Africa staff provided important baseline data to monitor the impacts of the construction on the environment. Throughout this process, important monitoring techniques were developed using remote sensing and camera traps that have led to successful conservation discoveries including the identification of the call and local breeding of the elusive

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White-winged Flufftail in South Africa, as well as improved veld condition and alien species monitoring. Warren Funston, the Eskom Biodiversity and Waste Centre of Excellence Manager highlighted that “an important principle of the Ingula Partnership has been to focus on Ingula’s contribution to science. Whether it be related to the development of new and innovative habitat assessment methodologies or globally important species breakthroughs. Through the Ingula Partnership, the importance of documenting new discoveries scientifically and sharing with the broader community remains an important contribution.

The major construction of the Ingula PPS was completed in 2016. BirdLife South Africa has been an integral partner in ensuring that consistent monitoring of avian biodiversity has taken place throughout the construction of the Ingula PSS. Carina Coetzer, Ingula Project Manager for BirdLife South Africa says that “valuable discoveries in terms of the seasonality of species’ presence on site, as well as their habitat and climatic requirements have been made while monitoring the site consistently. We currently have a recorded bird species list of 341 species, more than 23 threatened species occurring on the Nature Reserve – several of which are also using the grassland and wetland habitats to breed in. The opportunities the Ingula Nature Reserve provides through the Ingula Partnership is invaluable to the effective conservation of these sensitive habitats and species”.

The Ingula Partnership achieved another major milestone in 2018 with the declaration of the 8 000 ha Ingula Nature Reserve surrounding the Ingula PSS. This area secures the biodiversity and ecosystem services of the Senqu catchment headwaters which supplies water to the Wilge and Vaal river systems. Peter Nelson, Eskom’s Conservation Manager at the Ingula PSS stated that, “Working together as partners has allowed initially opposing organisations to combine resources and focus on a common goal. Their cooperation has resulted in the conservation of a significant wetland system and the establishment of an internationally recognised sustainable conservation area”.

Malcolm Drummond of the Middelpunt Wetland Trust was one of the founding members of The Ingula Partnership and shared his pride in the work carried out through this collaboration stating that, “Working with the Partnership has been a truly rewarding experience, resulting in many environmental benefits. Not least of these have been the application of techniques developed by BirdLife and Eskom staff at Ingula and other sites, resulting in significant advances in our knowledge of the White-winged Flufftail, advising our conservation practices.” A sentiment that was echoed by BirdLife South Africa CEO, Mark Anderson who commented “The Ingula Partnership has been a perfect example of how a corporate and the conservation NGO community can work together in a constructive and positive way for the ultimate benefit of the environment and biodiversity”.

In recognition of the stewardship shown by The Ingula Partnership to protect the important wetlands of the Ingula Nature Reserve, The South African Wetland Society awarded this collaboration the 2019 Stewardship category at the annual National Wetland Awards held in Tzaneen on 10 October 2019. After receiving the news of the award, Kishaylin Chetty, Senior Environmental Advisor and the Ingula Partnership Project Manager at Eskom’s Biodiversity Centre of Excellence commented, “The award received by The Ingula Partnership is an example that the continuous collaborative efforts between industry and conservation NGOs can lead to more pronounced conservation efforts, without compromising industry goals. The Ingula Partnership has worked closely together to complete the declaration of the Ingula Nature Reserve, ensuring the long-term security of the priority wetland, grassland and forest habitats that support a number of threatened species. Eskom is proud to be in partnership with BirdLife South Africa and the Middelpunt Wetland Trust and looks forward to further collaboration leading to improved conservation successes.”

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### **Additional Information:**

#### **BirdLife South Africa**

BirdLife South Africa is the country partner of BirdLife International, a global partnership of conservation organisations that strive 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 113 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. The Ingula Partnership is an important supporter of the programme and has helped to fund much of the conservation work carried out by the programme over the past 15 years.

#### **Eskom**

Eskom generates approximately 95% of the electricity used in South Africa and approximately 45% of the electricity used in Africa. Eskom generates, transmits and distributes electricity to industrial, mining, commercial, agricultural and residential customers and redistributors. Additional power stations and major power lines are being built to meet rising electricity demand in South Africa. Eskom will continue to focus on improving and strengthening its core business of electricity generation, transmission, trading and distribution. Eskom has a mandate to provide electricity in an efficient and sustainable manner. Sustainability at Eskom refers to providing affordable energy and related services through the integration and consideration of economic development, environmental quality and social equity into business practices in order to continually improve performance and underpin development.