Media release

For immediate use

A close shave for a scarce bird of prey.

Johannesburg, 18 September 2020:

Eagle-eyed conservationists are helping protect our country's natural resources in the face of a rapidly changing energy landscape, including protecting one of southern Africa's scarcest endemic raptors, the Black Harrier *Circus maurus*. Considered by many to be a breath of fresh air, electricity generated by wind turbines is a clean and renewable alternative to fossil fuels. There are, however, some environmental challenges associated with wind energy. One of these is that birds and bats may be killed if they collide with wind turbine blades.

"*We were naturally concerned when we received reports of Black Harrier fatalities at wind farms in South Africa. This species is Endangered and has a small, declining population*" said Samantha Ralston-Paton, BirdLife South Africa's Birds and Renewable Energy Project Manager. Wind farms in South Africa are required to monitor and report on their impacts on birds and bats. "*This monitoring allows us to test assumptions and serves as an early warning system – potentially significant impacts can be identified and addressed before it is too late*", she said.

Black Harrier expert and BirdLife Species Guardian, Dr Rob Simmons, was well placed to investigate why Black Harrier is at greater risk of turbine collisions than initially expected. Black Harrier is the scarcest endemic raptor in southern Africa – it only occurs in South Africa, Lesotho and Namibia and has a tiny global population of approximately 1000 mature individuals. Black Harrier normally hunts close to the ground, below the reach of turbine blades, but it appears that the risk of collisions increases during the breeding season when flight heights increase during breeding displays and nest provisioning. A recent analysis of the population by Dr Francisco Cervantes Peralta suggested that if just three adult Black Harriers are killed per year by wind turbines the population is likely to collapse in about 100 years. For five adults that collapse could come about in our lifetimes.

Dr Simmons teamed up with BirdLife South Africa's Samantha Ralston-Paton and Robin Colyn, and Dr Marie-Sophie Garcia-Hera (another harrier expert and past student) and together they have drafted the best available research, supplemented with expert opinion, in a simple guideline to support the appropriate location and management of wind energy facilities to avoid further impacts on this embattled species.

One of the key recommendations is that turbines are not placed near Black Harrier breeding sites and BirdLife South Africa has developed fine-scale spatial models that indicate just where these areas are likely to be. These maps can be used in the earliest stages of development and should help developers

avoid investing in unsuitable sites. The Guidelines also propose a number of other potential mitigation measures, including increasing the visibility of turbine blades, by painting one of the blades black or red – a novel approach that has reported recent success with other species at one site in Norway. The effectiveness of this and other mitigation measures still needs to be tested for Black Harrier.

Image Black Harrier flies at blade-swept height past an operational turbine in the Eastern Cape. © Julia Simmons

"*We understand that despite the environmental challenges associated with wind energy, there are also a lot of benefits. Our approach is to help bridge the gap between science and implementation and ensure that decisions are based on the best available information, so that no one is left in the dark*" said Samantha.

"*If these guidelines, in concert with BirdLife South Africa's guidelines on Cape Vulture and Verreaux's Eagle, help reduce the impact of renewable energies on our scarce birds of prey, then we can have a win-win – clean energy and a sky full of raptors*" concludes Dr Simmons.

The guidelines can be downloaded, free, from https://www.birdlife.org.za/what-we-do/landscape-conservation/what-we-do/birds-renewable-energy/

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Notes for editor:
BirdLife South Africa's Birds and Renewable Energy Project is sponsored by Investec Corporate and Institutional Banking.
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About BirdLife South Africa
BirdLife South Africa is the local country partner of BirdLife International. BirdLife International is the world's largest nature conservation Partnership with 115 BirdLife Partners worldwide, 8000 staff and 7 million supporters. BirdLife South Africa is the only dedicated bird conservation organization in South Africa. It relies on donor funding and financial support from the public to carry out its critical conservation work.

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