

MEDIA RELEASE

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Iconic African savanna raptors uplisted to Endangered on the global Red List of threatened species

African savanna landscapes are synonymous with sightings of large birds of prey. These majestic apex predators can give pause to even the least bird-friendly observer driving by. To behold such unique and powerful creatures against the dramatic savannas and grasslands leaves one with a sense of privilege and awe. Sadly, this privilege may be reserved for only a few generations more as the latest global Red List update highlights the true plight of Africa's iconic raptors. In 2020 we will see three of Africa's most famous birds of prey, the Secretarybird, Martial Eagle and Bateleur, uplisted to globally Endangered. While this news may come as a shock to many, it should also be a warning bell for us all that our natural world, what little remains of it, is battling to support these wide-ranging predatory birds and urgent conservation action is needed if we are to protect the legacy of African skies filled with large raptors soaring overhead.

In the 2018 State of South Africa's Birds report published by BirdLife South Africa, it was highlighted that over a quarter of South Africa's raptors are threatened. Threats facing this group of apex predators includes poisoning and persecution, mortalities linked to human infrastructure (including powerlines, fences and roads), loss of intact habitat with a sufficient abundance of prey species, and destruction or disturbance of suitable nesting habitat. On 15 December, owing to this myriad of threats facing these once-common and wide-ranging African raptors, BirdLife International announced that the Secretarybird, Martial Eagle and Bateleur have all been uplisted to Endangered following seriously alarming rates of decline – as detected by the monitoring work of BirdLife Partners, other ornithologists and citizen scientists across Africa and analysed by the BirdLife science team for the IUCN Red List.

BirdLife South Africa played an important role in contributing to the reassessment of the Secretarybird's global conservation status, having carried out a conservation project focused on this species since 2011 when the Secretarybird was first uplisted to globally Vulnerable. BirdLife South Africa's Spatial Planning and Data Manager, Ernst Retief, started the Secretarybird project and had this to say upon hearing the latest uplisting news "I had the privilege to study Secretarybirds for several years. During this time, I observed them for many hours foraging while walking slowly through the veldt, followed their movements through the data we received from tracking devices, and I saw what great parents they are through hundreds of camera trap photos at a nest. I also experienced extreme lows when picking up dead birds under powerlines or stuck in fences, but then there were fantastic days when we found chicks on a nest of an adult bird that we had tracked from his days as a nestling. I learnt that these are amazing birds, unique in so many ways, caring parents, and enduring inclement weather with ease. However, I also saw the threats these birds face daily, too many to mention here, and I fear for the day that we might not see them gracing our grasslands. The uplisting of this species to Endangered is a sad but necessary day. Hopefully, this will help to raise awareness of the plight of this species and lead to appropriate conservation actions."

The Secretarybird project was taken over by BirdLife South Africa's Landscape Conservation Programme Manager, Dr Melissa Howes-Whitecross in 2018. Dr Howes-Whitecross drove the successful Bird of the Year 2019 campaign centred on the Secretarybird, raising awareness of their plight across a range of platforms including through a citizen science project to record all sightings of individual Secretarybirds and their nests. Over 800 data points were collected from across South Africa

and these data will form part of an important monitoring programme which is currently being developed for the country which is estimated to have lost over 75% of its Secretarybird population since the 1980s. In response to the Red List update, Dr Howes-Whitecross stated “Encountering a Secretarybird in the wild can only be described as a captivating experience. For me it sparked my love of birds, birdwatching and ultimately my conservation career, and I am yet to meet someone lucky enough to encounter these incredible birds and not walk away in awe. Watching them stride and strike at dangerous snakes with pin-point accuracy and extreme force will impress even the most hardcore of us. For those lucky enough to get up close with these majestic birds, one can only marvel at the intricate beauty of their long eyelashes and crest of feathers that surrounds their soul-piercing eyes. Their uplisting should be taken as a serious warning sign that our fragmentation and mismanagement of open grassland and savannah ecosystems is having disastrous effects.”

The myriad of threats faced by these birds are almost too many to list, but habitat loss and degradation stands out as a prime suspect. These raptors require vast open habitat to seek out prey and trees to nest in, so the development and alteration of natural environments into agricultural fields, plantations, mines and buildings make the areas unsuitable, and also makes the birds vulnerable to collisions with infrastructure.

But even the raptors that nest in protected areas are not safe. For many years, Ernst Retief has followed Secretarybirds that he fitted with tracking devices. A recent analysis of the tracking data by Dr Howes-Whitecross and Mr Retief found high juvenile mortality rates of 46% within the first three years, as well as the lack of support offered by the protected area network: only 4% of tracked points fell within formally protected areas. These wide-ranging birds are often forced to forage beyond the protective boundaries of the reserves, exposing them to greater threats. Hence working with landowners outside of the formally protected areas is vital if we are to preserve Africa’s raptors.

BirdLife South Africa’s extensive biodiversity stewardship in the grasslands of South Africa relies on the Secretarybird as one of the flagship species for this conservation project and has enabled the team to declare over 100 000 ha of pristine grassland so far. By working closely with landowners to sensitise them to the presence and importance of birds on their properties, BirdLife South Africa is ensuring that these open landscapes remain a refuge for the Secretarybird and other grassland endemics found in South Africa.

While acknowledging the terrible news that these species are in trouble, the uplisting also brings about awareness and visibility to the plight of these important birds of prey. Falling under the Endangered category of the Red List focuses these species as conservation priorities and this recognition will assist conservation NGOs such as BirdLife South Africa to raise funds for their important conservation work aimed at preserving these iconic African raptors and their habitats.

BirdLife South Africa would like to acknowledge the generous funding and support provided by Nick and Jane Prentice, Laetitia Steynberg, the Airports Company South Africa and Petra Diamonds, both previous BirdLife International Species Champions for the Secretarybird, as well as the Ingula Partnership, a collaboration between Eskom, Middelpunt Wetland trust and BirdLife South Africa, for their support of the Raptors & Large Terrestrial Birds Project Manager. We would also like to acknowledge the assistance offered by numerous landowners, volunteers, bird clubs and conservation authorities across South Africa.

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Full References:

1. Whitecross MA, Retief EF, Smit-Robinson HA. 2011. Dispersal dynamics of juvenile Secretarybirds *Sagittarius serpentarius* in southern Africa. *Ostrich* 90(2): 97-110.
2. Hofmeyr SD, Symes CT, Underhill LG. 2014. Secretarybird *Sagittarius serpentarius* population trends and ecology: insights from South African citizen science data. *PLoS ONE* 9: e96772.
3. Taylor MR, Peacock F. 2018. State of South Africa's Bird. Report 2018. Johannesburg: BirdLife South Africa. BirdLife South Africa.
4. Full BirdLife International Global Red Listing Forum citation: <https://globally-threatened-bird-forums.birdlife.org/secretarybird-sagittarius-serpentarius-revise-global-status/>

Additional Information:

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 Endangered category are likely to become critically endangered unless the circumstances that are threatening their survival and reproduction improve. Endangerment is mainly caused by habitat loss or destruction of the species home. The Secretarybird was uplisted to globally Endangered in 2020.

Vulnerable

The 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 Vulnerable category are likely to become endangered unless the circumstances that are threatening its survival and reproduction improve. Vulnerability is mainly caused by habitat loss or destruction of the species home. The Secretarybird was uplisted to globally Vulnerable in 2011.

BirdLife South Africa

BirdLife South Africa is the country partner of BirdLife International, a global partnership of conservation organizations 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 Landscape Conservation Programme

BirdLife South Africa's Landscape 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 as well as their important habitats. BirdLife South Africa's Landscape Conservation Programme Manager is funded by the Rupert Natuurstigting and the Ingula Partnership, a collaboration between Eskom, Middelpunt Wetland Trust and BirdLife South Africa.



Support the conservation of the Secretarybird

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 *Secretarybird_YourInitials&Surname*, or can use the online payment platform accessed via www.birdlife.org.za/support-us/donate where the Secretarybird tab can be selected as the chosen cause.